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'KINDLING'

Laurie Jane van Blerk

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and minor inconsistencies. (May 2012)**

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

KINDLING

Laurie van Blerk

Thank you to my parents and friends for their love and support and a special thank you to Roy, for his inspired ideas, his attention to detail and his unwavering encouragement throughout the writing process.

day one. sunday. nothing ever happens.

day two. monday. the valley.

day three. tuesday. valuables.

day four. wednesday. strays.

day five. thursday. facts of life.

day six. friday. things happen.

day seven. saturday. helmet.

four months later.

Day One. Sunday. Nothing Ever Happens.

Fish Hoek was on fire. A month-long heat wave had dried everything out nicely for the arsonists, who got to work about a week before my twenty-second birthday and two weeks before Christmas, killing tortoises. That was the thing that bothered me the most, those tortoises, even more than the idea that my house could burn down, which wasn't too far-fetched an idea considering we lived on the hillside near the fire-break. My tortoise anxiety was fuelled by memories of a primary school field trip to Cape Point after there had been a fire there. We had clambered out of the bus into a charred wasteland, where everything was grey and crumbly and littered with tortoise shells. I had picked one up and heard it rattle with some crispy fragment of the creature that used to live in there. The whole business had really affected me. And it was happening again. The fire trucks were parked outside our house. Heavy smoke filled up the sky, but the flames were out of sight, just over the hill. The luckier tortoises were crossing the street into our garden.

My mother the optimist was putting up the Christmas tree. Snowmen and icicles and little frosted houses and glittery snowflakes were dangled carefully in amongst the synthetic branches while outside the hellfire of summer crackled through the fynbos and the insects screamed in the dead grass. She turned up the festive music and hummed defiantly over the sound of the sirens and the helicopters. My younger sister Vicky was sunning herself on the porch, her excitement at the arrival of the firemen apparently much deflated after she had found herself unable to spot one who wasn't at least twice her age and who didn't have a moustache. She was a grand master of appearing to be bored about everything, but I wasn't convinced. She had positioned herself directly beneath the path of the helicopters and the

spillage from their water buckets would drizzle onto her as they passed over the house. There was more to it all than attractive firemen. She was as thrilled about the end of the world as I was.

I was taking photographs of the apocalypse with my little camera, completely failing to capture the staggering height and density of the smoke cloud, the sickening heat rising off the tar, the vibration of just-controlled chaos that had people looking out of windows and congregating on front lawns. Not a single dog was barking.

My father entered the lounge looking greasy as hell. He wiped his face with a damp hanky and gave my mother a withering look.

"For God's sake, Brenda, we might have to take the whole thing down tomorrow."

"I'm not cancelling Christmas," she snapped. "They'll put it out."

Festive enthusiasm was usually whipped up and sustained by my mother, who was a fanatical collector of decorations. She wasn't mad about angels and nativity scenes, but she turned the mantelpiece into a sort of Father Christmas shrine, full of figurines and candles shaped like him. She had a soft spot for the guy, probably because he looked a lot like my father, except that Father Christmas didn't leave his underpants on the bathroom floor or crack hurtful jokes or watch the TV with the volume turned up high while she was trying to take a nap or fight off a migraine. Father Christmas was Leonard Franken, frozen in a jolly and generous mood, wearing bright, clean clothes and with his beard looking full and healthy and properly trimmed. My father didn't look very festive at all that afternoon, with damp, mottled-grey chest-hair escaping out of a vest that was covered in visibly spreading sweat patches. He didn't sound very festive either when he shook his head and said "Fucking hell, I want to emigrate."

My cat, Guts, was stretched out under a side table like a fluffy sausage. He was usually a round, squat cat, but the heat had elongated him to a surprising length, his front paws reaching out across the tiles, as if to absorb as much of their coolness as possible. He was orange, with vague stripes and a face like a pie: wholesome, self-satisfied, sometimes stuffed full of chicken. We had spoiled him into obesity. I was just reaching down to tickle his head when there was a knock at the door. I answered it, my slippery hand struggling with the door knob. I was expecting another fireman seeking out the ablutions or a glass of Coke, but instead I found Jason, holding a pair of ice lollies.

Jason was a large guy with a warm face and a head of shaggy black curls. He lived a few streets away from me, a somewhat safer distance from the firebreak, with his Granny Pam. She had taken care of him since he was a toddler. His mother had died giving birth to him and his father, Granny Pam's only son, had drunk himself to death in the years that followed. Jason's mother was black and his father white, and Jason's appearance fell somewhere in between. He had toffee-coloured skin and full lips and eyes that were a startling mixture of green and hazel. We were volunteer dog-walkers for a local animal shelter. I had known Jason since I was five years old, when we met at Little Fish play school and bonded over a bucket of plastic dinosaurs. I was also madly in love with him.

"Hey," he said, thrusting an ice lolly at me and grinning. "Thought you might need one of these."

I grinned back, but it was a forced grin. It wasn't that I didn't want to see him, it was just that the heat was making my brain feel swollen and I doubted I'd be capable of any sort of wit or charm. Plus, I was dressed like a homeless person and I hadn't shaved my legs. We sat on the opposite end of the porch to Vicky, our hands dripping with sweet, orange liquid as the lollies melted faster than we could slurp them up. I showed Jason my unimpressive photographs and we talked about the fire and watched the helicopters. I could feel a sweat moustache forming on my top lip.

"I'll be honest with you, Roni," said Jason, licking his hand. "I didn't come here to give you an ice lolly. I was planning on staying in my room all day in front of the aircon, but I'm seriously worried your house is going to burn down."

I laughed. "And you're going to save it, are you?"

"No. I just wanted to make sure I came here one last time before it happens. I mean, *if* it happens. There's a lot of smoke."

I raised a soggy eyebrow at him. "This happened before, remember? They've had lots of practice. It'll be out by tomorrow."

"Hmm," he sounded completely unconvinced. "I hope so."

"No, I hope it burns down," Vicky contributed. I had forgotten she was there. Or at least I cared so little about her presence, that I hadn't taken note of her since we had arrived on the porch. "Maybe if it burns down, we'll get to move out of Fish Hoek," she said and let out a jab of laughter that sounded both spiteful and excited at the same time. She'd lost a classmate a few weeks before in a drunk driving incident; a good-looking boy by the

name of Johan Botha. Since his gory death on the main road, her attitude towards most things, particularly anything to do with our home town, had become even more sour than it had been in the first place. I was cutting her a bit of slack, but it was difficult.

Jason looked at me and pulled his face. The corners of his mouth pinched in to form a tight little smile and his eyebrows jumped up under his hair. It was a face he used in a multitude of different situations and it always meant something different. In this case I think it signalled amusement and a plea for me to cut the conversation short. I tended to argue with Vicky about everything, all the time. Even when we agreed on something, we would argue about our reasons for holding the opinions or about the way the opinions were expressed. Sometimes we would just argue for the sake of arguing without even really knowing what we were arguing about, hissing and spitting and being altogether far too typical. It was embarrassing and I guess it exhausted Jason a little bit. So I ignored her. In truth, I wanted to get out of Fish Hoek as much as Vicky did, but not for the same reasons. And I didn't want the destruction of my childhood home to be the catalyst for us leaving.

Jason was looking out over the valley. It was tense out there. The cars, trees and ugly little houses were creeping and lurking and squatting underneath the red smudge of the sky. Everything looked uncomfortable and sticky. There was a lot of hooting going on down on the main road. Edgy people, short tempers, everyone getting in each others' way. A surfeit of impatience and sweat. Jason was starting to sweat visibly too. He had walked uphill to get to my house and he was also a little overweight. I wanted to dab his face with a damp cloth. He appeared to be deep in thought, and I assumed he was thinking about the fire, until he asked, "Have you seen Anton lately?"

Anton Polieri, a friend of ours since school days. He was naturally talented, handsome, popular and not my favourite person on earth. I didn't hate him, but I couldn't help but wonder what my life would be like without him in it. He brought out an acidic part of my personality that even Vicky couldn't provoke. I kept it under control just beneath the surface of my face, but it wasn't easy.

"No, I haven't," I said. "Not since he suggested that I dropped out of university because I didn't have the brains for it."

"Oh come on, Roni," Jason sighed. "You know he didn't mean it like that."

The sound of helicopters like Gatling guns chopped at the sky again and two of them emerged through the haze carrying their buckets, newly filled with water from the vlei.

"Such small buckets," said Jason. "It seems so..."

"Unlikely," I said, distracted, Anton still running around in my head, pulling on my brainstrings.

Jason nodded.

"So unlikely."

My mother had finished with the Christmas tree and a chorus of furious bashing and slamming from the kitchen signalled the beginning of dinner preparations.

"Mall later? Movies and milkshakes?" Jason asked. "At least there's proper air conditioning there. I'll drive."

I agreed to the plan and Jason left. The air outside was starting to give me a headache so I moved into the lounge with the intention of watching Cartoon Network for a while, but my father had melted over the entire couch and was snoring like a great, beached sea mammal. The kitchen was a war zone and I was tired of being near Vicky. I went upstairs to my bedroom and watched some of the fire fighters taking a tea break next to a fire engine. One of them was talking a lot and gesturing with his tea-free hand. I could hear the instructive cadences of his voice without actually picking up anything he was saying. He was short, but solid, and the way the others were nodding at his hand as it dissected the air suggested that he was more important than they were.

Before giving up on my studies, I'd spent a lot of time inhaling book-dust and getting ink all over my fingers and feeling pretty smug about it. But staring out of my window that afternoon, I wondered how it felt to be a physical person and not just a desperate brain absorbing nutrients through a pale, withered body; to have muscles that you could rely on to haul a fire hose or kick in the doors of burning buildings, and nerves that didn't hold you back. To have a moustache that perched on your lip like a fearless bird of prey.

Behind the firemen, the mountain bristled against the wall of smoke. It was mostly quiet and I rested my elbows on the window frame, feeling sleepy in the heat. There hadn't been a breath of wind all day, but the beginnings of a breeze stirred the hot air around my face. I closed my eyes and leaned there for a while and I might've even fallen asleep on my feet if one of the firemen hadn't spilled his tea all over himself and cracked the hazy quietness with an "*Ag shit!*" and a clattering scramble to catch the plastic cup before it

tumbled all the way down the road. One of the others was laughing at him. The short one wasn't.

My mother called out "Supper time!" like a battle cry from the kitchen, and I tore my eyes away from the firemen and slopped down the stairs. I wanted light salad, cold meat, chilled fruit with ice cream, but there was a mountain of sweltering, gravy-drenched, roasted stuff on my plate instead. I sat down at the table. My eyelids felt sweaty.

Vicky had planted herself in the seat nearest the little pedestal fan. She'd stopped it from oscillating so that it blew continuously at her face, flipping her fringe into an upright position. I was too lazy to protest and doubted it made much of a difference anyway, especially with the unbelievable heat of the roast bending and wobbling the air above the table. My father was still snoring on the couch.

"Len!" my mother yelled, marching towards the lounge holding a fly swatter as if she meant to wake him up with it. It was covered in fly guts. We had a few of those sticky strips dangling from the ceiling and they were also studded with flies, some dead and some still buzzing against the glue. "Len! Just like your bladdy father!"

My paternal grandfather, Grandpa Philip, was my only grandparent still living. His wife, Maria, had passed away many years before after a long battle with breast cancer, and he'd quickly replaced her with a young woman named Nabila. They weren't married, but they had been living together on and off for a few years. Nabila was nice enough, but I couldn't trust her or relate to her because anyone that young and attractive who would willingly shack up with someone like Grandpa Phil had to be either mentally ill or dangerously desperate. My mother didn't approve of the relationship at all, and she loved to rant about it, harping on the twenty-five year age difference between them and how quickly he had moved on after Maria's death. In my mother's eyes, Grandpa Phil was the epitome of sleaze, and she used him as a weapon whenever she argued with my father. "You're just like your father, Len! Two peas in a pod!" In her mind, being Philip's son was something that my father had to compensate for.

I started chewing on a piece of potato. Vicky, who was draped over her chair like a wetsuit, gave me a sudden, strange look.

"You're in love with him, aren't you," she said. It wasn't exactly a question.

"Who?" I asked, and immediately felt stupid. I thought of Jason, years earlier, when his hair was cropped short according to school regulations and we would sit in the shade

against the wall of the sports hall during break time and trade sandwiches. I pretended to be enthusiastic about jam because I knew he preferred the cold meat and I delighted in the fact that I could give him something he wanted. Granny Pam always gave him apricot jam. The cheap kind out of a tin.

Vicky flicked her hair and let out a lazy snort of laughter, signalling the end of the discussion. She didn't ask personal questions because she cared about me in any sort of sisterly way. She just found me amusing and enjoyed being right about things. I never felt like I was older than her. She had the cute fringe and the boyfriends and she went to all the cool parties and her phone beeped so often that I wanted to break it over the back of her head. There was nothing I could teach her about the world that she didn't already know; that she hadn't already experienced before I had. I wasn't the sort of older sister she could borrow clothes from or gossip with. If anything, I was a bit of an embarrassment to her. I wished the fan would power up and blow her chair over backwards.

Once we were all seated, my mother relaxed her face and tried to initiate some small talk. She started with me.

"So, Veronica, how's Jason?" she asked.

"Fine, fine, he—"

My father chose that moment to drop his roast-laden fork, splattering gravy onto himself, the tablecloth and the floor. Guts materialised and started licking it up.

My father swore and grumbled "Goddamn sweaty hands." My mother's face had tensed up again, eyebrows converging and lips pressing together tightly, intensifying all the little wrinkles around them. I didn't really want to talk about Jason anyway. I could feel Vicky's silent laughter. She wasn't eating any of her food. She always picked at her food, but never appeared to be eating it, unless it was something sugary like a chocolate bar or a fizzer. I had polished off my potatoes and gravy and left all the vegetables and meat sitting forlorn on the plate.

"Wow, this heat..." said my mother.

I zoned out, imagining all the other people in the valley sitting around their dinner tables or in front of their televisions, talking about the heat and the fire and the heat and the fire... What else can you possibly talk about when you feel like your face is about to slide off and land in your lap? Not much. You certainly can't talk about the person you're secretly in love with, and certainly not to your mother. Days like that are survived, not lived, and the

experience severely limits conversation. And when you're done stating the obvious and if you find the energy to turn on your computer and log on to Facebook, you'd probably find yourself updating your status to something heat or fire-related too. *'Veronica Franken is so sick of this heat!— is craving a cold swim!— is standing in front of the fridge with the door open, letting every single fucking penguin out!'* That's just how it is. There's not much room for creativity in such hot weather.

The Venter family down the road dug a pretty deep hole in their back yard, lined it with plastic and filled it with water, in lieu of a swimming pool. I guess you could call that creativity. Or desperation. Another family in the neighbourhood, the Nunes', was missing one of its children. Seven-year-old Kyle Nunes had gone missing just before the fire started. His face was all over the papers and the lamp posts. Kyle was well known for innocent trespassing, and I wondered if he'd run away to live under the bushes of someone who had a swimming pool. The weather was too hot for random kidnapping. Nobody would have the energy for such a thing.

My father said, to nobody in particular, "Pass the salt."

"There's no salt on the table," my mother snapped. "Go fetch it yourself. And anyway, it's salty enough."

There was no further conversation, unless you include the beeping of Vicky's phone and the commencement of her furious button-pushing. I couldn't imagine what was being said. Vicky didn't have a lot to say for herself that was of any value or substance, and definitely nothing that was worth typing out, and yet she had recently replaced her phone because, despite the device still functioning, she had totally worn the numbers and letters off the buttons. It was completely, entirely ridiculous. Her friends were vacuous teenagers who always laughed as though convinced that the sound of it was something that everyone else wanted and needed to hear. Their laughter saved lives, powered cities, made the world go round. A few of the females were, predictably, intrigued by Anton, who they had encountered at our house, hanging around as if he owned the place. He was typically good-looking and sure of himself and so inflated with smug pride about his vague Italian heritage that I was surprised his head hadn't exploded. The fact that he was several years older than them was probably also part of the appeal. Their laughter was louder and more gratuitous when Anton was nearby. Sickening.

And then Jason showed up and my cynicism lifted a little as I made my way out to his car, a battered, blue Toyota Tazz with a fluffy gorilla stuck in the back window by its suction-cup feet. I could've sworn I felt cool air against my skin, just for a moment. Once the car was in motion, I wound down the window and put my face out and it was glorious. Night bugs were whirring in the bushes and the sound pulsed as the car rushed past the gaps in the suburban greenery.

"Jeez, look at the fire," said Jason, jerking his head over his shoulder. We'd reached the main road and had a clearer view of the hillside from that distance.

I turned around in my seat and felt a strange tightening in my chest at the sight of it. There was a ribbon of flames curling along and the lights of the fire trucks were bright and urgent in the falling darkness. No moon, no stars.

"I rate you guys are going to have to locate your valuables tonight."

"Nah. They've got it under control," I said. "They would tell us if we had to."

There were a lot of cars turning up into our area and driving towards the fire, mostly occupied by bored dads and their offspring, going to have a look. A squizz. A gander. I wondered if all the nosy rubberneckers were despised by the firemen for crowding them and getting in the way or if they kind of liked the attention. It seemed like everyone on the main road was heading towards the fire and we were the only ones driving away from it.

Longbeach mall that night was, for the first time in my embarrassingly rich history with it, the best place in the world. Its cool floors and conditioned air were exactly what I would've asked for had I encountered one of those wish-granting genies. For my third wish? An ice-cold fruit smoothie. We headed over to the Mugg & Bean to see if that wish could be granted too. There were mall people everywhere, lurching around and consuming stuff and making wet, gargling noises and whatever else mall people like to do, but I was perfectly at ease until the crowds parted to reveal one particular table.

There sat Anton, drinking some sort of pretentious latte and talking to two girls, one of whom I recognised as Melody-Raine Miller, the most annoying person in the world. She had been in school with Jason, Anton and me in primary school and then again in high school, the two periods separated by a few years of homeschooling in which her mother, Ms Juliana Miller, had succeeded in strengthening and developing everything about her child which made her unbearable to most other human beings. I hadn't seen her in over three

years. She'd gone to study something in London and stay with her father there. Back in school, she had been a sickly-looking, buck-toothed creature with a shit-sniffing look on her face, but this wasn't the case anymore. In her years abroad, she had grown in to her teeth and become beautiful in a wispy, care-free sort of way and I think I despised her even more because of it. It was probably also the reason why Anton was sitting with her. He had never liked her before either. Jason guided me towards them. I was reluctant but also aware of the inevitability. I arranged my face and tried to pull my shoulders back a bit.

"Roni, Jason, hey!" said Anton, far too enthusiastically. He was immediately out of his seat and pulling up extra chairs to accommodate us. He had a sort of elegantly floppy way about him that he had practiced for years. When he sat back down, it was as if he was tossing himself onto an armchair. He ran a hand through his hair and then let the arm hang back over his shoulder for a while, elbow up, while he oiled us up with one of his toothy smiles, his head cocked to one side. I wanted to grab my smoothie and get the hell out of there. There was a lot of false and awkward fussing over Melody, who we hadn't seen in years. I hadn't missed her, but I had to pretend that her presence was a marvellous surprise. One-armed hugs were exchanged and everybody just about cracked their faces in half smiling at each other. Anton introduced the other girl as Sarah somebody-or-other, from one of his fourth-year business classes at UCT. She had a tatty handbag and was kind of awkward and extremely pale; basically translucent, like a glass frog or one of those catfish with the visible spinal columns. You could see the blood in her face ebbing and flowing in accordance with her level of uneasiness, and I liked her right away.

"Sarah's just moved to Fish Hoek and I thought I'd give her a taste of the night-life here," Anton said with a laugh. He really thought he was hilarious.

Sarah's face pulsed a little. "It's far away from campus, but I'm staying with my great aunt and it's basically free accommodation, so it's worth it," she said, very quickly. "I'm hoping to find a holiday job around here. I don't want to sit around in the flat with my aunt all day."

"Oh, that shouldn't be too difficult," I said. "Lots of places can't cope with the Christmas madness without extra staff. You could even try at the place I work at. We're swamped at the moment."

Anton laughed. "You wouldn't think..."

I wanted to hit him.

"Lots of people buy art and craft supplies as Christmas presents or to make decorations and things. We're pretty busy."

I had worked at the creatively named 'Carl's Arts and Crafts' (it was owned by a man named Carl) since dropping out of UCT two years earlier. It was a pretty relaxed job. I generally worked five days a week and got to pick which days I took off. Some weeks, I'd work every day and others less than five. I'd just worked for eight days in a row to justify taking a few days off before Christmas. Carl was doddery and mostly relaxed and as long as everything worked out, he wasn't particularly bothered how the staff organised their shifts.

Sarah liked the sound of this and decided she would come in with me on my Monday shift, to investigate the possibility of working there. For some reason this triggered a look on Melody's face much like the look I remembered her having most of the time in school. It was a condescending smirk full of superiority and amused pity.

"So, Veronica, you're working at a craft shop," she said. "I thought you were studying?"

She had been absent for too long to call me 'Roni'.

"I was," I said. "I guess I picked the wrong subjects or something. Couldn't get into it... um..."

She smiled. Shit-sniffingly. I thought of her and Anton tumbling around in his king sized bed making horrible noises. I wanted to vomit.

"It's ok, Roni," she said. "It's not for everyone."

And then I actually did want to vomit. I felt the saliva welling up in my mouth and swallowed hard. Once, during break time in primary school, Melody had told us about Karma and suggested that Jason's parents died because they deserved it.

"I'm sure they had evil secrets," she had said knowingly. "Bad things usually happen to bad people."

In a rare show of anger, Jason had pushed her, causing her to stumble backwards and whack her head on a hideous papier-mâché mask on the wall behind her. He had two weeks of detention after that, for hurting Melody and for damaging Gary van Zyl's art project. I sat there at the Mugg & Bean, thinking about this, holding on to my bag to stop my hands from shaking. Melody was talking to Jason about his fine art course. He looked happy enough. I wondered if I was the only one holding grudges. I wanted to go home.

We ordered some stuff from a very sullen waitress and the conversation went deeper into dangerous territory. They were talking about what they were doing, how their studies were going, what was filling up their lives; events and people and places; where you can buy the best sushi, see bands perform, get drunk, watch the sun set over the sea. It was one of those self-indulgent sort of conversations – each one of them, even Jason, chewing on the words like they were cream caramels, while a void started to open up somewhere in my chest. Melody had finished studying marketing at some supposedly fancy-pants institution in London that I had never heard of, and, she informed us, she was now taking a year off in Cape Town before deciding what study next.

There was nothing wrong with my life. I was privileged, comfortable, loved. There were whole communities of people in the valley who were less fortunate than me. Some were begging at the robots, digging for food in the rubbish bins of the middle-classes, waiting on the roadside for labour, spirit levels in hand. I was lucky. But somehow it just felt like nothing ever happened. In suburbia, the sun came up, and then set and then came up again and people watered their lawns and trimmed their hedges and fortified their homes against unwanted intruders. There were fences and alarm systems and horrible, vicious dogs installed, but sometimes the intruders got in anyway. I didn't like feeling unsafe but I didn't like barbed wire either or being woken up by the neighbours' temperamental house alarms, and I especially didn't like their fanged beasts throwing themselves against the fences and foaming at the mouth when I walked past on my way to and from work. I thought about it. What did I like? I liked Jason. But nothing ever happened.

And then, predictably, they were talking about the fire and I was dragged back into the conversation because my house was the most likely to burn down.

"Oh God, are you worried?" Sarah asked, raising her almost-invisible, yellow-white eyebrows. She looked worried even though she'd never seen my house and I'd only known her for five minutes. I wasn't worried, but then I felt like maybe I should have been, so I shrugged and said "A little bit."

"Make sure your photos are safe," she said. "That's what my mom always says. You can replace everything else, but you can't replace your photos. I mean the old fashioned ones. The digital ones you can just store online or something."

I wasn't sentimental about many pictures that had been taken with a digital camera. There were a few of Jason and Guts and Christmas dinners with Grandpa Phil, his hairy neck

and his partner (or "mistress", as my mother liked to call her), that I wouldn't want to lose, but the best pictures were the old ones, the ones with my parents as young people. I used to love holding those pictures with the stained edges and the dates scrawled on the back. Looking at them was like looking through dirty little windows into the past, when my father was narrow and beardless and my mother had bright lips and swoop of hair set like a frozen wave on her head. The past was a funny colour; orange-brown and faded. It looked like it was always warm back then. The grass was always dry. People were drunk most of the time, or high. Lots of them were dead now; car accidents, cancer, alcoholism. It was only a matter of time before people from my generation started dropping off. In fact, they had already started. Johan Botha was dead, little Kyle Nunes was missing... But our pictures would never fade. Future relatives would always be able to look back through the little windows and see us, clear and colourful, with pores and zits and everything in the countless digital photographs we dumped online for everyone and for no one. The past wouldn't be a funny colour anymore. It would be crisp, but impersonal; the lack of finger marks and ragged edges making them mean less, somehow. My parents were the last generation living in that sepia haze. We couldn't hide behind it like they did.

I looked at Jason, who was looking at Anton, who was looking at Melody, who was looking at me. I could feel her eyes on my face, scanning it, enjoying its averageness and the unfortunate density of my eyebrows. Our drinks arrived and were consumed and we talked and paid and then ambled out towards the parking lot, as one does when a mall gathering ends. There was a hint of coastal night-time freshness in the air, but not much. The sticky heat was still crouching over the valley and I could smell the tang of burning fynbos even from that distance. Hugs were exchanged and we were just splitting into our two groups when Melody seized my arm.

"Roni," she said. It sounded wrong coming out of her mouth. She was trying it out, seeing if it still worked for her. It didn't, but she used it again anyway. "Roni, we should meet up some time. Like back in the day. Catch up and whatever. I've missed you."

And out of my mouth came "How about Tuesday?" and it was settled.

I always loved receiving quality bath products as gifts, regardless of how unoriginal the idea was and how little effort went into the process of purchasing them. The clean, beautiful smells were addictive, sometimes to the point where I could imagine strapping a

bar of soap to my face so that the aroma could be enjoyed constantly. However, I hardly got to enjoy these products properly, because I would hoard them until they lost their smell or went a funny colour or, in the case of creams and gels, became congealed or dried up. That night, in the stickiness and smell and general discontent at having an unwanted person reinserted into my life, I decided to indulge myself. I ran a lukewarm bath full of bubbles, lit some of my dusty, scented candles and peeled the wrapper off a bar of honey-scented soap. I plugged the dripping cold water tap with my big toe and lay there, feeling the grime of a fiery summer day dissolve off my skin. My parents had gone to bed and the house was quiet. I closed my eyes.

Outside, there was no noise except for the sound of the fire which was the sort of sound you could tune out; you could forget it was there until it stopped, like a fridge humming or the fuzz of radio static. I was drifting off in there, sliding down so that the bubbles stuck to my chin. My tap-plugging toe was getting a bit numb from the cold, so I slipped it under the water and let the tap drip. The sound of dripping taps was one of those sounds I always struggled to tolerate, but I was sleepy enough to ignore it. There was the sound of footsteps on the stairs, descending, bare feet on wood, cellphone buttons being pushed furiously, and then Vicky's voice, hushed and spitting.

"Why the fuck are you calling me, Orbs, just leave me the fuck alone."

I was awake then, lying alert under the bubbles, wondering why on earth someone would have the name "Orbs" and if they were male or female. Vicky often sneaked downstairs for night time phone calls. The walls between the bedrooms upstairs were cardboard-thin, and she was unfortunate enough to have the room next to our parents'. I'd had first choice when the rooms were chosen and had laid claim to the one across the passage. One advantage of being the older sibling. There was silence for a while, and then Vicky's hissing continued.

"No. No, I don't want to see you, it's enough. Call the fucking cops then. I'll tell them what you – Orbs?" A pause. "Fuck."

I slowly slid my toe back up to plug the dripping tap. I didn't want her to realise I was in the bathroom. If she needed to pee, that would be it. She'd try the door handle and find it locked and realise I'd been lying there the whole time. I'd pretend to have slept through everything, be annoyed at her failing to knock, play the indifferent sister. The sound of the bath bubbles crackling softly as they disappeared seemed loud in the silence. I waited. There

was nothing for several minutes and then the sound of feet on the stairs again, going up this time.

Vicky and I used to play with Barbie dolls on those stairs together. Her dolls were always in worse condition than mine. She gave them horrible haircuts and tattooed them with permanent markers. She would lose the fiddly things, like the handbags and tiny clip-on accessories. While my dolls were mountain-climbing up the stairs, hers were arguing or getting naked with each other in the Barbie car. The bath foam was silent. It was almost all gone, only a soapy film of it remaining in shrinking shapes on the surface of the water. I wiggled my fingers through the shapes, breaking them up.

Vicky was in some sort of trouble and I was more curious than concerned. She would hate me if I tried to get involved. She would embarrass me in front of Jason, post ugly lies about me on the internet, tear up my notebooks, ruin my favourite clothes. Once, she covered my favourite Barbie in black spots. They wouldn't come off. She was kind enough to spare the face. From then onwards, that Barbie always wore a pants suit and shoes and a scarf, even when she was at the beach. The other Barbies laughed at her but she didn't complain. She would have the last laugh when they all wound up with wrinkles and skin cancer. I wondered if I would have the last laugh or if it would be Vicky. We couldn't both turn out all right. Maybe she would get the shit out of her system one day and become a perfect woman, while I, having kept out of trouble all my life, would suddenly grow bored and succumb to the chaos.

The bath water had gone as cold as it could go in that sort of weather. It wasn't refreshing. I drained the tub, dried myself off and headed up to bed carefully and quietly so as not to alert Vicky. It was tricky on the wooden stairs but I managed, pressing my feet down gently, toes first. The passage upstairs was carpeted and so I picked up a bit of speed, flitting past the other bedrooms like a shadow and slipping through my door without any hesitation. There was an orange glow through my curtains and I pulled them open slightly to look out into the fiery night. The fire engines were still stationed there.

One window was lit up in the Bergsteins' house across the road; a square of blue-ish light behind pale curtains that contrasted strongly with the fire glow outside. I could see movement behind the curtains and then they parted and Josh Bergstein, the only child of Daniel and Teresa Bergstein, looked out into the night. His computer was on behind him with what looked like a computer game running on it. He rested his elbows on the window

sill and looked down at the firemen. I watched him for several minutes before he looked around and saw me staring at him. There was an awkward moment in which neither of us did anything and then he waved at me. I waved back and then quickly drew my curtains and got into bed. My family didn't interact much with our neighbours. The Bergsteins had lived across the road from us for many, many years and yet our interactions were limited to stiff greetings when we bumped into each other outside the houses and barely noticeable nods of recognition if we encountered them anywhere else. Josh was about my age and he seemed like a decent guy, and maybe if we'd interacted more from when we first became neighbours, we could've been friends, but too many years of suburban coldness had made any sudden attempts at friendship seem strange. I stood behind my curtains, wondering if Josh was still looking out and felt stupid. I resolved to make an effort to be more neighbourly when I saw him again.

I climbed into bed and lay there, surprised at how hard my heart was beating, feeling the sweat forming on my skin again as if I hadn't just bathed. I felt a bit sick. The best nights were those after the rain when the slick snails came out and the sky was massive with pinpoint stars and cloudy wisps; when it was just cold enough to hug my duvet around myself, but not so cold that my toes ached. Those nights smelled fresh, clean, herbal. As I lay there in the stickiness, I longed for one of those nights. And I longed for other things too.

Delirious, desperate, damp sheets strangling my thighs. I kick my feet but they're trapped, they're bound. The bed, my clammy captor, holds me close and tight. I can feel the sweaty pillow move under my face; a heaving, perspiring chest with a cruel heart beating against my cheek. The twisted arms of the blankets grip me. I'm nauseous with fear, trying to inch my spider hand across the mattress towards the edge. I want to grip it and pull myself out. There's something flapping inside my clothes, oily wings beating against my skin, crawling up towards the wet neck of my night shirt, trying to get out. I want to scream but my throat is choked with sand and my tongue is thick and dry. The carpet is glowing with embers. They're blowing in through the open window and scattering all over everything. The curtains are going to catch alight. The goddamn curtains.

Anton and Melody are in the bed next to me, doing something unspeakable. They weren't there a moment ago, and neither was the second bed, but somehow it's as if they've been there forever. They want me to join in. They're both speaking Italian, and I can

understand it. Melody has a fine, bright silver chain around her neck with a little glass bauble suspended on it. It's swinging back and forth and I follow it with my eyes. There's an ember inside the bauble and it's pulsing like a tiny fire heart. I want to pull it off her neck and break it; smash it against the ground under my foot until it's just powdered glass and ash.

And then I'm standing on the pavement outside Jason's house, leaning over the gate. The embers are everywhere, whirling through the sky and tumbling across the ground. Everything is black and orange like the whole world is on fire and there's a roaring sound in my ears. Jason is walking away from me, towards the house. The embers are flying into him and eating small holes in his clothes. They're landing in his hair, his beautiful black hair, that's blowing around in the storm. I call out to him, but my voice is lost in the noise. I want him to stop and turn around and look at my face. Maybe if he sees that I'm burning, he will love me.

University of Cape Town

Day Two. Monday. The Valley.

People always moaned about Mondays but for me, they were much like every other day. My mother was up early, wrestling with the vacuum cleaner and swearing at Guts when he got under her feet. He wasn't scared of noisy appliances like other cats. He liked to have his coat vacuumed and whenever my mother was trying to do the floors, he thought it was all about him and couldn't seem to understand why she kept pushing him out of the way with her bunny slippers.

My father was off to oversee a painting job and Vicky was at the kitchen table, moping over her breakfast cereal. She hated school, but it seemed to me that she hated school holidays just as much. I thought about asking her some careful questions regarding the phone call I'd overheard from the bath tub; but thought better of it. She acknowledged my presence with a dark flash of her eyes as I sat down opposite her with my own bowl of crunchy cardboard crap and milk.

It wasn't long before the vacuum cleaner was roaring around the table, Guts in tow. Vicky rolled her eyes in annoyance and plugged one of her ears with a finger. My mother switched the appliance off and put a hand on her hip.

"For God's sake, Vicky, could you stop poisoning the atmosphere around here? I'm cleaning the floor under your feet and all you can do is sit there like a sack of woe and pull a lemon face. I could make you sweep if you'd prefer that?"

"I just have a headache –"

"Then take a pill and go back to bed. Your attitude is driving me mad."

"Jesus, mom, a little fucking sympathy wouldn't hurt."

"Don't you dare swear at me, Victoria. My sympathy ran out weeks ago. You're like this whenever you're home. If you don't like it here, we can ship you off to Grandpa Philip. Maybe after a week of diarrhoea from Nabila's cooking, you'll realise how lucky you are."

"Lucky?" she coughed. "You think I'm lucky? Roni's lucky. At least she has Anton and Jason."

"I don't *have* Anton and Jason..."

"I don't have anybody," her voice wobbled a bit. She was such a teenage stereotype in that moment, that I almost laughed. My mother didn't look amused though. Her face had smoothed out a bit and her eyebrows lifted.

"Is this about a boy, Vicky?" she said, a little more gently.

"Oh, now you want to talk!" said Vicky. "Now that it might be a soap opera! Well, I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to talk to anybody!"

She stood up, pushing her chair away theatrically and stormed off up the stairs.

"And yet she's talking to somebody just about every minute of the day on her phone," I commented. My mother didn't say anything. The silence was broken by a rather demanding meow from Guts. He was sitting next to the vacuum cleaner, waiting for it to be switched back on. My mother obliged him.

"She's still upset about her friend that died in the car accident," I said, but my mother didn't hear me over the roar of the appliance. I got the feeling that there was more to her bad mood than Vicky's behaviour anyway. My parents' relationship hadn't been good for a long time and it was always worse in the summer. As it was the most uncomfortably hot summer in living memory, it came as no great surprise that my mother's already short fuse was clipped even shorter than normal. She vacuumed with vigour, her eyebrows gathered and her lips puckered and pressed together.

Sarah arrived, cheerful and red in the cheeks. She was going to drive me down to the craft shop in her Honda. I was sad, in a way, to miss out on my walk. It wasn't often that I got out in the fresh, or in this case fire-scented, air and saw the neighbourhood in detail. The weeds in the pavement cracks; the pottery gnomes and fairies lurking in Mrs Venter's overgrown lawn; the wall spikes, pathetically disguised by plastic ivy leaves; BEWARE OF THE DOG, PASOP VIR DIE HOND, LUMKELA INJA. It all streamed past in a blur to the sound of radio presenters laughing at their own jokes and giving their opinions on stuff they didn't know

anything about. A song came on; some pop rap fusion. Sarah sang and tapped her hands on the steering wheel. I waited through the chorus, hoping to hear her rap along with the verses, but she stopped once the singing bits were over.

"I wish they would kill this fire now," she said. "Hopefully they'll put it out by your birthday. Anton told me it's your birthday on Thursday. He said you hadn't organised anything. I guess that's because of the fire. But maybe they'll put it out! You should organise a little party, maybe, if you want to. I can help out?"

It was a lot of words. I wondered if she was nervous about asking Carl for a job at the craft shop. I felt like I was meant to say something, but couldn't decide which part of the monologue to respond to before she started speaking again.

"My aunt is quite a good baker and she's taught me a few things, so I could bake you snacks if you want some snacks. I also have a bunch of party stuff left over from my last birthday. Streamers and balloons and that sort of thing. I mean I know you're turning twenty-one? Twenty-three?"

"Twenty-two."

"Twenty-two, yes, but you know. It's still nice to have balloons and things. Makes it feel like a proper party, like when you were a kid, when birthdays were still really exciting and stuff, you know."

"I think that would be great," I said. A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth.

"Really?" she said. "Oh, cool. I wasn't sure you'd be keen. I mean I hardly know you and all that, but then I don't really know anyone around here. I don't even know Anton very well, honestly. We chat on campus sometimes, but that's about it. He seems nice though."

I felt simultaneously sorry for and jealous of Sarah in that moment. She was lonely and in a strange place and yet here she was, giving me a lift to work, trying to organise a birthday party for me, pressing forward with social confidence despite the fact that she was a strange, pale creature with an ugly car and a handbag that looked like a vagrant's loincloth. I wondered what her bedroom was like. Did she still display her childhood knick-knacks? What sorts of pictures did she have on the walls? Did she bother with pictures at all?

I thought of a girl I once knew, named Karen. We had been friendly for a while in the early days of high school when Melody had just returned from her years of home-schooling. I latched on to Karen as if we'd known each other forever because I wanted Melody to think

she had been replaced, or something petty like that. I didn't have much in common with Karen. She had strange opinions about things and she went to church. She didn't only go on Sundays either. There were youth group meetings and fund raising events and happy-clappy musical affairs and various other holy activities that she was always participating in. I didn't give up on her because of that, however. It was only after I went to her house that our friendship fizzled out.

The houses on either side of hers looked all right, but hers was nothing short of depressing, with dead pot plants on the patio and a rusty Weber braai full of stompies. The front lawn looked as if it had been recently doused in petrol and set alight. They had a sprinkler going, but it hadn't greened the place. Instead, the borehole water had made everything smell like flatulence and stained the front walls a dirty brown. A couple of neglected-looking dogs lurked behind a gate at the side of the house. It was March and the Christmas tree was still up inside, dusty and miserable, strangled with ragged tinsel and sporting a few cheap ornaments that looked like they were all from the same set. She didn't comment on it. Perhaps it had been up for years and she had stopped noticing it altogether. The furniture smelt like dogs and there was a tacky ceramic crucifix above the fire place, flanked by equally tacky angels.

Her bedroom was also depressing, with a girly duvet cover appropriate for someone fifteen years younger than her, and faded as though she'd had it that long. She had stuck pictures of celebrities all over her wall and their smiling faces and the gigantic dust bunnies under the bed and the dirty pink teddy bear with the one sad eye made my skin crawl and my cheeks flush and I wanted nothing more than to be at home. I wanted to bury my head in a basket of my mom's clean washing; something that smelt right. I spent all of that afternoon fighting off the feeling, that feeling, that almost everything in the world is horrible and wrong and that other people are broken or missing that part of them that allows them to recognise this and do something about it.

"Aw, shame, poor teddy. Let me put it..."

"No Roni, it's the dog's toy. Leave it there for the dog."

You can't give a teddy bear to a dog. It has a face.

We arrived at the craft shop a little early. Lwando was already there, waiting outside for Carl to open up. The craft shop was really just a part of Carl's house. He'd assigned more

space to his business than to his living quarters and as far as we could tell, he had just one little room and a kitchen that was closed to the public. He let his staff and his more desperate customers use his little bathroom. It must've been the only bathroom because there was always an old-fashioned razor on the sink and a damp cake of soap in the shower cubicle which was dewy from recent use and also mossy in places. He kept a supply of toilet paper in the unused bath tub; it was the scratchy, single-ply variety with that greyish colour that made it look as though it had once been newspaper.

I introduced Sarah and Lwando. She blushed madly until even her ears were red. Lwando looked like he wanted to laugh, but he didn't. He had been working at the shop longer than I had; just over three years, which, he said, was about two years too many. Other employees had come and gone, but he'd stuck around and I got on quite well with him. He was much better with money than I was and made far fewer mistakes on the cash register, so he was usually in charge of manning the till while I breezed around the shop, keeping things orderly: paints grouped in their colours, ribbons rolled up neatly, price tags in line with the correct products... I enjoyed this part of the job, because most of the time I could switch my brain onto an automatic setting and relax while my hands busied themselves with smooth papers and silky ribbons and soft, clean paintbrushes. The process and the resulting neatness was extremely satisfying; therapeutic even.

As a rule (and it was one of the only rules that was enforced) there always had to be one of us at the till, even when there weren't any customers in the shop, and it was frustrating for both of us sometimes, particularly when there was a lot of work to be done on the floor and the till person just had to stand there and watch. Once, Lwando left his post to help me sort out a bad bead spill caused by an elderly woman who had fallen against the beadwork table. Carl had walked in and seen the empty till and had a fit about it. He was shouting so much that his false teeth were coming loose and little strings of spittle were flying out of his mouth. It was always a bit of a shock when he got angry, probably because we were so used to him being quiet and glassy-eyed and referring to us as "my girl" and "my boy".

There was the scratching of a key in the lock and the door of the shop creaked open to reveal Carl himself, stooped and wrinkly and dressed in his usual brown pants and brown shoes and hairy brown jersey.

"Good morning, good morning, good morning," he said. One for each of us. "And who do we have here?"

Sarah took a bold step forward and put out her hand. "Good morning Mr McCarthy, my name is Sarah Hattingh and I would like to know if you have any work available for me. I have my curriculum vitae in my satchel, if you would like to have a look at it." She called it a *satchel*.

I shot a glance at Lwando. He was flattening a weed with his shoe and watching it intently. Carl stood there in silence and blinked a few times, before snapping back into consciousness and shaking Sarah's hand.

"Ok, all right, all right, let's get inside and have a look at this document, shall we," he said, and herded us all into the shop. He sat at the back with Sarah while Lwando and I set things up, pouring change into the till, straightening the merchandise, putting out the welcome mat and the pavement signboard which read: GET CREATIVE THIS CHRISTMAS! FESTIVE BEADS, RIBBONS, PAPERS, PAINTS. AFFORDABLE AND FUN!

Lwando was in charge of thinking up and painting these signs. He said he wanted to go into copywriting one day and maybe start a fast food chain or a landscaping business. He wanted to do a lot of things. I didn't really understand why he was still working at the craft shop. I was there because I didn't like change, but he didn't seem to be that sort of person. He was always moving around and going places and doing new things. He could easily have found a better paying job where the manager didn't mispronounce his name and he didn't have to degrade himself by scrubbing glitter glue out of carpets. But there he was, and I was thankful for it.

By the time Lwando and I had put out the pavement sign, Sarah was employed. She fashioned herself a name tag from a torn off strip of her CV, a safety pin and piece of sellotape, and got to work familiarising herself with the stock. She was very intense about it; glaring at the oil paints and inspecting the wooden stamps like they were clues at a crime scene. Lwando shot me a wide-eyed glance and shook his head.

It was a slow start to the day. The customers only started to trickle in as lunch time approached. I didn't have much to do. Every time someone stepped into the shop, Sarah materialised in front of them and offered to help. She was perhaps a little too enthusiastic. A few of the customers seemed taken aback as she marched them across the store and lectured them on the necessity of purchasing various products. I think several purchases we

made just to shut her up. One woman walked out with ten tubs of glitter, a small sack of sequins, half a litre of craft glue and a piece of cardboard about the size of an average door. All this woman had wanted to do was make a star for the top of her Christmas tree. Frankly, Sarah was annoying, but it was her first day and she meant well and I figured it would wear off soon enough.

I spent most of the day lurking around the bead table, playing with the beads. There were so many different sizes, colours and textures, and Carl got new stock in all the time. There were cold glass ones and wooden ones and ceramic ones that warmed quickly in my hands. Some were big, some were small like drops of tinted water, some were made of brightly coloured polymer clay, with tiny patterns and pictures in them. I painstakingly picked out the beads and findings that had fallen into the wrong containers and returned them to the right ones. I strung the odd beads on to a length of cotton and pinned it along the edge of the table for decoration. And then I was bored.

A homeless man pushed his trolley past the shop. It was full of crap like tangled fishing line and empty noodle cups and stolen real estate signboards. He had a filthy, three-limbed plush toy tied on to the front of the trolley like a figurehead on a ship, and I thought about Karen and her abused teddy bear for the second time that day. I could hear the man talking to himself in a language that only he could speak. A siren wailed in the distance. For a weekday morning in the festive season, the atmosphere was pretty bleak. That creepy, disconnected feeling I had experienced at Karen's place all those years ago seemed to fill the whole of Fish Hoek, as if it had leaked out of the sad, ugly houses and soaked into everything; the schools and the shops and the churches and the churches and the churches.

Carl came in from the back just as I was about to fall asleep on my feet. He had jam on his top lip.

"My girl, go and get some lunch. You look like you're about to expire," he said.

He was right, so I fetched my handbag from behind the till and headed out towards the main road in search of food. The heat was starting to pick up and where the sky wasn't soiled with smoke it was a glaring white-blue colour that felt uncomfortably close, as though cling wrap had been stretched between the valley's hills, the sun a hot lamp behind it.

There weren't a lot of people around. I could hear the cars on the main road, just out of sight, bugs chittering in the bushes, the slap and crunch of my shoes on the gravelly pavement and then, after a while, other shoes behind me. More than one pair, I thought.

Maybe three pairs, slapping and crunching. They were moving quickly, getting closer. Something tightened in my chest and my elbows pressed in at my sides, squishing my handbag more firmly against my body. One of its buckles was digging in somewhere near my armpit. I kept walking, head down. I didn't want to turn around. It would be three little kids with plastic aeroplanes, three aunties hurrying to the shops, three sweaty people in jogging shorts and fat, white takkies. Three of them, I was sure of it. *Good morning, good morning, good morning.* They would wonder why I was turning to look at them. I would feel stupid. I'd have to pretend I'd heard something else or was looking for someone or had some other reason they wouldn't know anything about for peering over my shoulder. I'd have to stop, tie a shoelace, check my watch, fiddle with my cell phone, appear to know what I was doing. I'm not paranoid, I'm not scared. This is where I live. It's my territory.

Then they caught up and they were exactly who I had known they would be from the start. Four, not three, swaggering, terrifying young men. Low pants, hats pointing everywhere, laughing at me with their faces. One of them jumped in front of me and danced around waving his arms like a mad man. He roared and made random, crazy noises, letting his tongue flap around his mouth like a hooked fish. He was chewing something blue. I could see it stuck to his back teeth. I stopped, cowered, stumbled back. They laughed louder. There were words mixed into it that I didn't catch or I couldn't understand.

"You scared? You scared, girly?" he slapped his thighs. It was hilarious, apparently. My heart was gulping. I seemed to have lost control of my limbs. The wiring had burnt out somewhere. My hands were clutching my bag even though my brain was screaming "Drop it and run! DROP IT AND RUN!"

"I've got a knife here," one of the other guys said. "Big sharp knife."

They were all laughing again, even harder. I couldn't see their faces. I was walking backwards or maybe sideways or maybe I wasn't moving at all. I could feel my insides cringing. Nothing but cloth and skin between my organs and this big sharp knife. My eyes darted around, looking for the glint of metal in the sun. There was an earring, a watch, a chain, a tooth, but I didn't see a knife. I was trying to think of something to say that would make them leave me alone, but my head felt light and my throat full of sand. And then they were turning on their heels and they were gone, dancing down some other street, filling up the space with their voices. I stood there frozen for some time, trying to think but failing, and then I was leaning against a Vibracrete wall with tears leaking out of my face. I was a

joke; a ridiculous, pathetic joke. I had dropped my handbag onto the ground and it sat there, neatly zipped up and untouched.

I started to head back to the craft shop, lunchless, and as I walked I felt something building up behind my face. It was an expression trying to fight its way to the surface, but my face wasn't equipped with the necessary features to display it properly. I needed horns, fangs, eyes of fire... There was a scream lodged in my neck somewhere and my teeth were clenched together so tightly they started to hurt. I sat down on a bollard and tried to breathe it out. I wasn't in a hurry to get back to safety, away from the murderers and rapists and muggers and dancing, laughing vessels of random cruelty. It didn't feel like something that could happen twice in one day and besides, if anyone had tried to mess with me then, I fancied myself capable of decapitating them with my bare hands. Such was the feeling pumping through my body like a toxic slime.

Just a few months earlier, my father had bought Vicky and I each our own Taser . He had handed them to us solemnly one afternoon, a day or two after one of his painters, a man by the name of Isaiah, had found his daughter in a ditch somewhere in the Masiphumelele township where he lived. She had been raped and stabbed.

"I'm not trying to scare you," my father had said, raising his bushy grey eyebrows and knitting them together in the middle. "But we don't need to be stupid about it, either. I don't want my girls to be... statistics."

I never took the Taser anywhere. I tucked it away in the bottom drawer next to my bed, in amongst the jumble of papers, pens, solidified lipsticks, plastic offerings from Christmas crackers and the odd congealed tube of itchy-bite cream. It was the drawer where things went to die and be forgotten. But I remembered the Taser as I sat there, breathing, rubbing my sweaty hands together, blinking the sun out of my eyes. I imagined the crack of electricity slamming into the body of the dancing man. His blue gum would fly out of his mouth, along with all of the air in his lungs and maybe some words too. I wouldn't care about the words. I'd let him hit the ground and then I'd kick him and all of his friends would run away in horror. No laughing or swaggering, just running, heads down, arms pumping. Maybe I'd catch a second one with my weapon before he got away. It would be glorious. They'd cry and sniffle like bratty little girls and maybe one of them would shit his pants and they'd know not to fuck with anyone ever again. And although I knew how unlikely it was

that it would ever play out this way, I resolved to fish that Taser out of the drawer and keep it in my handbag anyway.

I walked back to the craft shop in a daze. Lunch breaks were meant to be around half an hour long, but Carl's plastic clock on the back wall told me I'd only been gone fifteen minutes or so. It felt like days had passed.

"Yoh, Roni, what's wrong?" Lwando said as I walked in through the door. I must've looked bad, all washed out and puffy around the eyes. I was starting to feel hungry again.

"I think I need to go home," I said. "Feeling pretty sick."

I could tell he wasn't convinced. He drew his lips to one side and was about to say something else, but then decided against it.

"OK," he said. "I'll tell Carl. He's gone off with some old lady. Going to get some, you know, hah."

"Hah."

Sarah was attending to a customer in the acrylic paint corner. She was talking a lot and moving her hands around while the customer emitted a series of "mmm"s and "uh huh"s, evenly spaced, alternating, like a machine. "Mmm. Uh huh. Mmm. Uh huh. Mmm."

"Tell Sarah..." I wasn't sure what he should tell Sarah. I didn't feel like talking to her right then. I was worried that she would get all crazy and start interrogating me and then insist on driving me home. I just wanted to be alone. "Tell her I say bye."

Lwando nodded his head. He was watching Sarah, too. "Will do," he said.

"Bye Lwando."

"Bye Roni. Hope you feel better soon."

He pulled his eyes away from Sarah and smiled at me. It was a sad sort of smile. He seemed a little disappointed that I wasn't telling him the truth. But the truth was embarrassing. Getting "almost mugged" isn't much. In fact, it was less than that. It was nothing. They never planned on mugging me. They just wanted to have some fun, to laugh at me, to make me feel ridiculous. They had succeeded.

I walked home.

My mother was sitting on the couch, asleep, with her reading glasses sliding off her nose and a copy of the *People's Post* lying limply across her lap. I could see badly printed photos of the fire and one of Kyle Nune's face on the front of the paper. They had picked

such a naughty-looking picture of the missing boy. One could argue that he was smiling, but it looked to me as though he was baring his teeth like an animal. They were his adult teeth, newly acquired, still serrated on the edges and far too big for his face. They overlapped in places in order to fit in, and his eye teeth were high up in his gums, like mine used to be before months of orthodontic torture had forced them to behave. I could imagine him sticking his tongue out and singing, "Naah naah nah naah naah! You can't find me!" I'd seen him around the neighbourhood before he had disappeared. He always had some sort of fluorescent juice stain around his mouth, as if someone had scribbled on his face with a highlighter.

With Vicky out and my mother dead asleep, the only company available to me was that of Guts, which I was thankful for. He got in around my feet, vibrating with his gravelly purr and scraping at my ankles with his tongue. I picked him up, a feat requiring a considerable amount of strength, and lugged him up the stairs. He was a furry sack of potatoes until he decided he didn't want to be carried anymore and started wriggling powerfully like a great maggot, twisting his spine and throwing his weight around until I had to drop him. I had planned on dumping him on my bed in the hope that he would stay there and keep me company while I pulled myself together, but he had writhed free before I made it to my bedroom. We were outside Vicky's room. The door was ajar. Guts made up my mind for me and nosed his way in through the gap. I followed him. It was partly curiosity and partly the need to take my mind off the muggers that moved me into the bedroom.

I don't know what I was expecting to find. A wall covered in eerie newspaper clippings and stolen photographs or a sketchbook full of creepy drawings and drops of dried blood and tufts of hair stuck down with sellotape... Unlikely. This was a teenager's bedroom in suburban Fish Hoek and my mother was in there all the time, straightening the junk on the shelves and smoothing out the bed sheets. I didn't find an obsession wall or a sketchbook, but I found the next best thing. It was a box, at the back of her cupboard, in amongst all the other boxes, behind the shoes. I noticed it because it had a piece of paper sticking out of it and a slight twinkle of glitter-glue along the side. I pulled it out of the cupboard and opened it.

Most of it was girly letters written on exam pad paper and decorated with little hearts and stars and smiley faces and other such things. These were the sort of insincere letters passed around during boring classes in high school. I'd been there myself, with Karen

and with Melody-Raine, putting great effort into the little pictures and into the curliness of my handwriting but none at all into the vacuous messages that it formed. Vicky's were the same, although slightly more devious.

Heyyy love
Im fuckin sick of this shit
Mr Kannemeyer dresses to the left haha, check it out
I need a smoke.
Vix

Her handwriting was angular and attractive, with all the extenders flared like slightly curled feathers. Her friend's handwriting in the response underneath was more typical: squat and bubbly with circles dotting the *i*'s, and *g*'s with coiled tails.

Jeez, your right lol
I dunno what he's on about Vix
Also sick of it
Drinks later? Need somethin 2 look forward 2
Love u
Becs

After reading a few of these letters I had learned that my sister was a smoker, she hated maths and she wasn't fond of using apostrophes. None of this surprised me much and I found myself getting bored, so I skipped most of the remaining letters and pulled out the one that was on the very bottom. Unlike all the others in the box, it was written on half a sheet of manuscript paper which was slightly soft to the touch, as if it had been held a lot in sweaty hands or carried around in a school backpack for some time. The message was brief and written in an untidy scrawl.

Hey Vicky
Thanks for letting me borrow your bio notes
See you at Zanele's party later
Love Johan

It could only be Johan Botha, recently launched through the windscreen of the car that he was too young to be driving and splattered over a parked vehicle and the surrounding tar. Perhaps she had loved him. I couldn't imagine her weeping over a scribbled thank you note, clutching it against her bosom like some precious treasure, and yet here it was, worn and unique and carefully stowed away and I felt a pang of sadness for Vicky, even if it was only for the Vicky I was imagining and not the real flesh-and-blood one. Flesh and blood and teeth and lip gloss. I knew she would be home soon, so I packed the box away, hoisted Guts over my shoulder and sneaked out of the room, pulling the door almost closed behind me.

Guts hopped onto the swivel chair at my computer desk. I pushed him off, sat down and wiggled the mouse, causing my monitor to light up with a lazy crackling sound. Jason was online. I stared at his little green icon for a while, imagining him sitting there in front of his clanking dinosaur of a computer, drinking cold Milo and downloading stupid animal videos. I opened a chat window and watched the cursor flashing on and off and on and off. Type something. Type something. Type something.

I nearly got mugged today.

I feel violated even though nothing really happened.

I can't relate to my sister.

I know there's something going on with her but I don't know what it is.

I'm in love with you.

In the end I settled for "Hi" and then watched the word sit there like a parcel on a doorstep. Not that I ever saw parcels get left on doorsteps. They'd probably get stolen right away. The cursor flashed slowly, counting the seconds. There was a sort of frustrated pressure in my head that started building up. I didn't know why I was so desperate for Jason to answer me, but right then it felt like the most important thing in the world. I wanted to climb through the chat window into his room and shake him. *Answer me. Answer me. Answer me.* Five minutes passed that felt like an hour and then his response popped up: "Hey Roni, what's up." No question mark. My face puckered up a bit. I was very sensitive to things like punctuation in times of emotional insecurity. The lack of a question mark

suggested that he wasn't really asking me a question. In my head, his voice said the words in a flat, disinterested way. It was an automated response. He probably didn't want to know what was "up". His timing hadn't been wonderful either. Maybe he didn't want to talk to me at all.

Roni says:

Not much, just having a bit of a crap day.

Jason says:

Same here. Not handling the heat very well. Can't stay focussed on anything.

Roni says:

Hmm.

What had started off as a mild sprinkling of dissatisfaction blossomed into full-fledged annoyance. He didn't ask me about my crap day. He told me about his instead. He made it all about himself, right away. It was as if Anton was on the other end of the conversation instead of Jason. A few minutes passed before my "hmm" had the desired effect.

Jason says:

You ok?

Roni says:

Not really no. Nearly got mugged today. Feeling quite shitty actually.

Jason says:

Fuck! What happened??

Nothing happened. I made a fool of myself in front of some strangers. I left work early like a lazy slacker. I snooped around in my sister's bedroom because I'm curious about the drama in her life and she'd never consider talking to me about it and I have no drama of my own. I wanted Jason to come over with some more ice lollies and give me a slightly awkward hug and tell me that everything was going to be ok, but I had nothing to bait him with. It was stupid. I wished I had never started the conversation.

Jason says:

Roni?

There were question marks now, but I didn't feel like answering questions anymore. I wanted him to give a shit without me feeding him a sob story first. I didn't even have a sob story. I'd have to exaggerate and fabricate and I just wasn't in the mood for it.

Roni says:

Aah, it's no big deal. I'm fine. Gotta go, mom's calling me. Chat later maybe.

Roni says:

:)

I logged off before he could type anything else and crawled into my bed. Something dug into my thigh as I lay down and I felt about with my hand to discover that there was a round object forced into the pocket of my jeans. It was a bead; one of the expensive glass ones with glittery swirls inside it. I could remember playing with it before I had left Carl's in search of lunch, but I had no memory of putting it in my pocket. Hunger-induced, accidental theft. I played with the bead in my hands for a while, holding it against my eye to see the room in a twinkly kaleidoscope of sea colours, letting the afternoon light catch it and throw spangles of blue and green onto the walls. Then I set it down on my bedside table.

Guts joined me on the bed, settling his great bulk onto my thighs and purring like a construction vehicle while occasionally curling his claws into my flesh. A most affectionate torture. He'd been the largest and ugliest kitten in a litter of assorted gingers at the SPCA when we'd gone there in search of a pet seven years earlier. While the other kittens were mewling and tumbling over each other, Guts was at the back of the cage, shredding a blanket. I fell in love with him immediately. At first he was grumpy and elusive, but it didn't take long for him to get over that. Within months he was a fat, lazy, furry lump of a creature, happily throwing himself under everyone's feet. He had blankets and toys and boxes to play in and a scratch post that he neglected in favour of the furniture and food and love in abundance. Despite starting his life in squalor, he'd ended up with a sweet deal and he was chuffed about it, although he clearly felt it was nothing less than he deserved. He always had a superior look about him. He liked us, but he looked down on us. I respected that. In his position, as an observer of my family, a big fluffy fly on the wall (or windowsill, as it were), I'd probably feel the same.

I lay there for a while, thinking, before my eyelids slid closed. They weren't thick enough to block out the brightness in the room, which lit up my dream in a blood red, like something I'd seen on TV before, a special effect in a documentary about the human life cycle. A curled foetus in a bright womb, the creature glowing through its pouch of pulsing blood vessels. It's a Chinese paper lantern with a candle inside. I'm alive! I'm sitting on a bollard with my hand over my belly button and the blood is pumping out between my fingers.

"You scared girly?"

He's trying to pull the handbag off my arm, but my hand seems to be stuck to my stomach, the bag is in the crook of my elbow and he's pulling, pulling. I want to move my hand away so that he can take the bag off my arm and leave, but I can't. And I can't tear my eyes away from the blood. It's pooling at my feet, spreading out over the ground and already there are footprints in it, bloody footprints in all directions. Running shoes, dancing shoes. He's dancing now, dancing and pulling.

"You scared? You scary, girly? I've got a knife here."

"Then cut the bag. Cut it off me. I don't want it. Just leave me alone."

I woke up sweating. Guts wasn't on the bed anymore. I'd probably been tossing and turning too much for his liking. He was sitting on my windowsill, looking out. His broad silhouette was blocking out the sun, which was starting to sink in the sky. I could hear helicopters in the distance and voices outside on the street, mostly male, one female. I got out of bed too quickly, wobbled through a moment of tunnel vision and then went over to the window to have a look. My mother was out there with some of the firemen, passing around a Tupperware container full of cookies. The firemen were smiling politely at her. I could see a few of them making their way up towards the firebreak, through the bushy area between the Bergsteins and the Armishaws.

Guts and I watched them for a while until my mother, blushing and waving awkwardly, headed back towards the house with an empty container. Then Guts hopped off the windowsill with a "prrrt" of farewell and headed out of my room, probably to corner my mother in the kitchen and force an early supper out of her through the use of emotional blackmail. I was about to leave the window when I spotted Vicky coming up the road. She wasn't alone. A chubby, black-haired girl and a lanky boy with a fringe covering most of his face were walking with her. Unlike Vicky, who was dressed for the weather in sandals, short

shorts and a strappy top, both of them were wearing jeans, hoodies and big shoes. They looked moody and uncomfortable. I wondered if one of them was "Orbs". They were the sort of teenagers one could find hanging around at the kiddies' play parks at dusk, smoking on the swings and scratching rude words into the wooden parts of the roundabout. They came to a halt at our driveway, hugs were exchanged and the black-haired girl continued on up the road, hands deep in her hoodie pockets. Vicky and the boy stood around for a while, talking. She was looking at the sky and he was looking at the ground. Their voices were low and I couldn't pick up any of the words.

After a few minutes, they parted company, Vicky heading towards the house and the boy heading back down the road the way they had come. He took only a few steps before stopping and turning to look back at the firemen. He stood there for some time, watching them, one of his hands jumping up compulsively to push his greasy hair out of his eyes. He was still there when I heard Vicky's footsteps on the stairs and the small creak of her bedroom door as she pushed it open. The Bergsteins' terrier started yapping at the boy. He lit a cigarette and stalked off.

Day Three. Tuesday. Valuables.

As each birthday approaches, I recalculate. I'm half-way to being middle-aged. I've lived, if I'm lucky, a quarter of my life. A third of my life. Half of my life. I have ten years to go if I don't mess this up. Maybe tomorrow is the day. Maybe something is already falling out of the sky towards my head. I remember when I had a pinecone thrown at my head. It took some skin off my ear. I remember how my ear throbbed and whined and burned. That was the day before my eighth birthday. I remember the cake. It was made of two white sponge cakes stuck together with a thick layer of stodgy custard and sealed up with a violently pink icing. It had sweets pressed into it, and eight candles. Two candles were left burning after I blew at them and all the kids laughed and made noises and I blushed until my face was as hot as my ear. Two burning candles meant two boyfriends. In my lifetime? Simultaneously? Were they present in the room? I don't remember the symbolic significance of the burning candles but I remember my burning face and the completely ridiculous mortification that I felt. The thought of a boyfriend was both terrifying and repulsive. To be attracted to someone and to have others know about it. To have the person you're attracted to know about it. Unthinkable.

In primary school, I was attracted to a boy named Liam. He was small and freckly with big eyes and what I thought was a wicked sense of humour. Whenever I saw him I felt like my heart was going to beat itself into a pulp against my ribcage. My mouth would dry up and I would feel like a hideous, lumbering imbecile. I wished I wasn't taller than him and I wished that he would smile at me. I would expect to see him everywhere I went, even if it

was the most unlikely place conceivable, like at the dentist or in my grandmother's backyard.

It was an all-consuming attraction. He was in my head all day and all night and I would doodle his name over and over and over again and then destroy the pages, ashamed and fearful of having my feelings discovered. One day, I confided in Melody-Raine. It was such a relief, such a wonderful thing, not to carry that weight alone. But she was Melody-Raine and I was only just starting to understand what that meant. We'd undertaken all the necessary ritual steps to sealing the promise of confidentiality but she broke our pact in a moment of girlish spite and my worst fears were realised when my secret was chanted out one morning as we all stood in our lines, shivering in oversized school socks. It was like the apocalypse. The sky opened up and doom rained down upon me. I felt like I had been hollowed out and filled with fire. What would Liam think of me? He would be embarrassed, disgusted. He would laugh and make me feel like I was half his size. Or worse, twice his size.

Liam and Veronica, sitting in the tree, K – I – S – S – I – N – G.

I had never kissed anyone. That was something grown up people did. And then one day, quite unexpectedly, I was a grown up person. It came out of nowhere, like a pinecone to the side of the head. I didn't feel worthy of the respect I'd once given to twenty-two year-olds. What did I know? I knew nothing. Only now I had to pretend I did. I had to pretend that boyfriends and kissing and, God forbid, sex, weren't terrifying to me so that nobody would realise I was still eight. I wondered if all those adults had been pretending too, wondering when they were meant to have evolved into the people they'd respected as children. Maybe everyone is always acting as though they know what it means to be an adult, every generation thinking incorrectly that they're the first generation to be secretly confused about it all. It seemed to me as though becoming an adult was a purely physical thing. I was controlling a different arrangement of cells with a startling collection of new problems – acne, breasts, menstruation, wisdom teeth – but apart from this unfortunate maturing of the body, there was very little other development. I knew a few more facts, I had a few more skills, but I still felt like a child, running through a bewildering forest of legs, looking for something. Maybe maturity, in the non-physical sense, is something fictitious

but everyone is too afraid to point it out. Like the emperor's new clothes. He's completely naked and we're all pretending we can't see his bits flapping about.

I never kissed Liam. I don't even remember what happened after that terrible morning. Liam didn't stay cute for long. He got muscley in high school, he played rugby, he had a tattoo of a springbok on one of his shoulder blades and he called everyone "bra", even if they were female. But I didn't care about Liam then anyway. He was irrelevant. There was only Jason.

Jason had always been there, but in high school, it was as if he came down off a cloud, surrounded by golden light. It happened when his voice broke. It didn't go through a squeaky, wobbly stage, it just morphed smoothly from the cartoon voice of a small, woodland creature into a rich baritone that sent shivers down my spine. He filled out around the same time; some would say a little too much, but I always thought he carried his weight well. He was perfect. A lot of people thought Anton was perfect, but this wasn't the case. His marks were impressive, he had big bright brown eyes, he always knew exactly what to say to make people fall around at his feet, he played the violin on stage from time to time — but none of this changed the fact that he loved himself more than anybody else and that when you were close to him, he tended to make you feel pathetic. At least that's what he did to me.

I was eating cereal, something disappointing that looked great on the box but like dried out bits of bird shit in my bowl. My father was sitting opposite me, staring at a limp newspaper and my mother was busy hanging the washing on a clothes horse in the kitchen because she didn't want to put it outside and have it all smelling like smoke. Vicky was pressing buttons on her cell phone. It was time for fire talk.

"Couple of little fires sprung up all over the place last night," said my father. "It's getting out of control. The wind's carrying the sparks around."

I stepped out onto the porch and scanned the valley. Plumes of smoke were rising from various places on the opposite hills and smudging in the wind. The helicopters were already thudding across the sky. It would be another long day for the fire fighters. They seemed to have the fire under control on the slopes behind our house for the time being. All of the fire engines except for one had left to combat the flames springing up in other areas. Cape Point was burning, Ou Kaapse Weg was burning. There weren't many ways out of the

valley and I imagined the fire trapping us all between the hills and then driving us into the sea. There were sharks in there. An old lady had been gobbled up in the waters off Fish Hoek beach just a year before. It took her whole, they said. Like in the movies. They could only find her swimming cap, nothing else.

There was a knock at the door. Everyone ignored it at first, expecting someone else to answer it. My mother was still hanging washing, my father poring over the newspaper. Another knock. I stayed put on the porch, planting myself on a plastic chair and watching the helicopters.

"See who it is, Vicky," I heard my mother snap. "You're closest to the door!" Vicky obeyed, but not without huffing about it. When it came to social rituals, Vicky hated the unknown. She always avoided responding to mysterious knocks at the door or answering phone calls when the identity of the caller was withheld. The door squeaked open. Vicky's greeting was high-pitched and bouncy and followed by a bubbly burst of laughter. I knew right away that it could only be Anton standing on the threshold, though I couldn't think why he would be visiting. I stayed put until Vicky called out, "Roni, it's your friends!" and I had to peel myself off the chair and go to them.

He was standing there with Melody-Raine, both of them looking silky-smooth and flawless in the morning sunshine. Pure skins, fresh clothes. Melody had bright, glittery-pink eye-shadow on and matching lipstick. It should've looked tacky and I wanted it to look tacky, but it didn't really. It looked great. There were strings of beads draped around her neck. She was clutching a cute handbag with a cat face on it. I wondered if she even liked cats.

Anton flashed his teeth at me. I could feel Vicky melting.

"Roni, hey!" he said. "Can we come in?"

He was already pushing forward into the house before I had answered his question, and Melody slipped in behind him, like a fish. Anton greeted everyone in the house heartily and then made his way towards the lounge as if it was his lounge. Melody and I followed him in.

"We're heading off to Kalk Bay in a bit," said Anton, flopping onto the couch. "Want to come? We'll pick Jason up on the way."

I was only planning on doing an afternoon shift at the craft shop and I couldn't think of an excuse not to go so instead I said "Where's Sarah?"

Melody laughed. It wasn't a cruel laugh; it was dismissive, and I felt a pang of guilt that I didn't really understand. Melody had grown up and anyone who met her now might mistake her for someone worth knowing, but I knew better. I'd seen all her facial expressions and heard all her laughs when they were still in their crude, prepubescent form. She might've refined her attitude for her own benefit but she was still the same Melody-Raine who would scratch "friendship tattoos" into my arm with the drawing compass from her maths kit and tell me that if I cried I was a coward who didn't understand loyalty. She was sitting on a chair, straight-backed and with her knees primly pressed together, looking around with what I imagined was a look of distaste. I couldn't be sure though, as her face almost always looked like that and my opinion might have been marred by my feelings towards her.

I didn't want to spend any time with that girl, no matter how much she'd changed, and yet it wasn't long before I was grabbing my handbag and climbing into the back seat of Anton's car. Such was the nature of my social life. Sometimes it felt like everyone was tied together by the feet and I either had to be dragged along with them or cut myself free and fall completely off the face of the earth. I couldn't afford to brush off any social opportunities. I was already in danger of becoming a recluse. A day out with these two wasn't appealing, but I figured Jason's presence would make it worthwhile. Melody was up front, clipping in her seatbelt and, once again, I found myself imagining her tangled up in Anton's bed sheets, squealing.

We pulled up outside Jason's place. It was a modest little house that always looked immaculate. Granny Pam had someone in once a week to mow the lawn and trim the edges of the flower beds. She had installed a bird bath to one side of the garden path and a robin was in there, going completely spastic and splashing water everywhere. Anton did the knocking; he had a confident, rhythmic knock with just enough force behind it to make it unignorable.

Granny Pam answered the door, wearing her Sunday best. She was always well dressed, as if she went to sleep like that, pearls and all.

"Good morning, Pamela," said Anton in the annoying voice he reserved for older people when he was pretending that he respected them. They fell for it every time.

"Good morning Anton, Veronica," she said, and eyed Melody with open suspicion. "I don't believe we've met...?"

Melody opened her mouth and put out her hand to introduce herself, but Anton did it for her.

"Pamela, this is Melody-Raine, an old friend of ours from school. Melody, this is Jason's grandmother, Pamela."

"Lovely to meet you dear," said Granny Pam, unconvincingly.

It turned out that Jason was still asleep after the neighbour's dog had kept him up all night yapping at the fence.

"I ought to poison a steak," said Granny Pam, quite seriously. Melody stifled a laugh.

We were shepherded into the house and left in the lounge while Granny Pam went into the kitchen and put the kettle on to make Jason some wake-up coffee. Inside the house it was neat and old-fashioned in every expected way. The furniture was all upholstered in shades of beige and brown and topped with crocheted antimacassars and faded tapestry cushions that were too hard to be comfortable and too ugly to be decorative. At the door there was a hat stand that always had one old hat hanging on it. There were floral coasters on all the table-tops, glass cabinets with collections of banal porcelain figurines and the walls bore various dull paintings of flowers in vases and picturesque country scenes from long ago and far away. An old clock on the wall ticked solemnly, a constant reminder of the steady passing of time and our inevitable death at the end of it all.

Granny Pam owned three well-groomed and curiously odourless cats that followed us with their eyes from wherever they were sitting. They were nothing like Guts. They were like fixtures; upright, silent, question-mark tails. Granny Pam called them Fluffy, Muffy and Duffy, but I didn't know which was which and they all responded to any of the names. There had once been a Puffy too, but he had gone under the wheel of someone's car, right outside the front gate. Jason had found him there, wrapped him in an old shirt and buried him at my place before Granny Pam found out. She thought he had turned feral and gone to live off the wildlife in the mountains.

"He always was a free spirit, old Puffs," she would say, fondly.

Melody had perched herself on one of the armchairs and was humming and tapping her foot and trying hard not to look awkward. At first I felt weirdly smug about how at ease I was compared to her and then I thought about it a little more and realised that being in my element inside the house of an old woman didn't make me more impressive than Melody. If

anything, I was losing points, not gaining any. Anton was stroking one of the cats. It was purring mechanically, as Melody might have purred if he had been stroking her.

Shortly after Granny Pam had gone down the passage towards Jason's room with a steaming cup of Ricoffy in hand, Jason lurched into the room looking haggard and untidy. He appeared to have spilt some of the coffee on his sleep shirt. Anton smiled with all his teeth and even engineered some eye wrinkles so it almost looked genuine. "Kalk Bay! Wanna come?" he said in his brightest voice. Despite this effort, I still got the feeling that he didn't really want Jason to come. He wanted to be the guy with the two girls cruising around the trendy place. And he was in luck. Jason rubbed a finger into one of his eyes and yawned.

"I'm sorry, guys, but I'm fu—". He looked around to see if Granny Pam was in the room. She wasn't. "I'm fucking tired," he said. "I'm going to sit this one out."

There was a sinking feeling in my stomach. Jason's presence had been the only appealing thing about the outing and now that he wasn't going, I didn't want to go at all, but it was too late to get out of it. I wanted to strangle him almost as much as I wanted to kiss him. I tried to catch his eye to pass on a few meaningful stares, but he was having none of it. He had never been much of a morning person, always puffy and gummy-looking with nightmare hair and a tendency to break out ridiculous monster yawns every few minutes. It was annoying, but still far more endearing than Anton in the morning. Even at school camps, with the rain and the mud and obvious grossness of boys tents or dormitories, Anton always looked fresh and sparkly at the beginning of the day, as if he'd got up earlier than everyone else and scrubbed and brushed and moisturised himself to perfection before anyone saw him.

We left Jason there and drove off and I faded into the dull designs on the fabric of the back seat. They were chatting up front. I felt like I was intruding, like I'd wiggled my way into something I wasn't naturally a part of. I leaned my head against the window. Pavements streamed past and the conversation blurred. I remembered the summer high school ended. We were newly legal. We couldn't get out of the valley fast enough. Anton had stubble on his face, Jason was letting his hair grow wild, Melody had a purple streak dyed into her fringe, I had grown my nails and painted them orange, we were free. We showed our ID books nervously at the doors of noisy clubs in Claremont and in town and walked inside pretending to be at ease. We didn't have to pretend for long. After a few shots of tequila, we were sucked into the crowd, folded into the noise and the smoke and

the lights and the darkness. My first night out was an ecstatic blur of colours and sounds and faces that filled me up until I felt like I was overflowing with the world and Anton had to stop me from hugging random strangers all the time. I forgot how much I hated him and Melody that night. He was perfect, like Jason, and Melody was my sister and ally. I danced between them, I hugged them, I squeezed their hands and I realised over and over again how lucky I was to have such special friends.

That one night, it felt like Fish Hoek was on the other side of the planet. Fish Hoek with its low buildings choked with real-estate agencies and cell phone repair shops and the cold winds blowing chip packets around the train station. The city was just as ugly but it was alive. It had a pulse and I had my whole body directly on that pulse. It was telling me THIS IS WHY and I was so glad that I finally knew.

"Fuck. Jase, Ant, Mel, this is awesome. We... we have to do this every weekend."

"What?"

"Every weekend..."

"I can't hear you."

"Every weekend."

But it didn't work out that way. We went out a few more times, but each time it was less amazing. I started noticing how dirty the places were, how much the drinks cost, how uninspired some of the music sounded. It stopped feeling like everyone in the place was there to feel the pulse of the world. Most of them just wanted to get their hands on booze and attractive people and show off in front of their friends. I danced less and less, I drank less and less, and I began to spend more and more time fixing my make-up in the bathroom or hogging a seat somewhere and watching everything. A spectator. A spectre. I was amused, but cynical. I was happy to be out, but not because the experience was filling me up like it used to. It was something I could tick off on my list. *I went out this weekend. I passive-smoked a bit. I didn't sit around with my cat all night, reading a book. No, I went out.* But then I left UCT and I stopped going out almost altogether. I scrapped my lists. All of them. Melody went away to London. Anton made new friends. Jason became reclusive and caught up in his art and his internet.

I had felt connected to Anton in the haze of the first year parties, but once I had withdrawn myself, he came into focus again. Toothy, superior, self-aware. He could never be Jason. In the back seat of his car that morning, I felt like a stranger and wondered if he

ever thought about it. About connections forged and then abandoned. About what brings people together or what builds glass boxes around them. I felt like I was in a glass box, but nobody was looking in. I could just see them and hear them and tap my finger feebly against the side every now and then, only to have the sound drowned out by Melody's laughter. Why the hell was she there? Why the hell!

We arrived in Kalk Bay, parked and joined the holiday chaos. The place was all narrow roads and quaint old buildings and it didn't seem capable of handling the masses of people and cars. I thought about it all crumbling into the sea; all the restaurants and the antique shops and the places selling overpriced bohemian clothing imported from Thailand. The smoke stain had tapered off around the coast and the sky was mostly blue above our heads. Despite the traffic, the air was pleasantly fresh with a saltiness blowing off the sea. I breathed it in in gulps.

We had parked near the station and Anton led us through the railway underpass. There was a rather suspicious-looking fellow lurking in there. He was leaning against one of the walls wearing dirty overalls and a cap pulled low over his face. We gave him as wide a berth as possible and made our way into the Brass Bell, where we sat down on a wooden table bench beside one of the salt-rimed windows. The sea was lapping gently at the rocks, tiny waves breaking with that soothing sea sound. It was pleasant weather, but not my personal favourite for the venue. I loved it most when the sea was wild; crashing and spraying and threatening to drag the whole restaurant off the rocks.

Anton summoned a waiter with his eyebrows and we ordered some drinks and hot chips. Melody got a compact mirror out of her cat bag and checked her face. It was perfect, but she applied a little lip gloss anyway. Her nails were short but neat and painted with a slightly glittery clear varnish. She had a few delicate silver rings on her fingers. She was lovely. I felt hideous.

"I liked this place more when I was eighteen," Anton said, looking around. There were people of all ages milling about, but I understood what he meant. Those who looked the most comfortable and who were making the most noise were the teenagers. At night the place would be crawling with them; smoking and drinking and fouling up the bathrooms and yelling at each other over the music that pumped out of the club section.

Melody, quickly turning the conversation away from something she couldn't fully participate in having left for London during our party years, said "So, Roni, how's your sister? She seems very grown-up."

I laughed. "No, she really isn't. We don't get on. I mean, we don't hate each other, but we're not close."

"She's a bit of a party girl, isn't she. You two are not very much alike."

I felt the little barb in that. Roni, the boring homebody. Roni, the one with no life.

"She's sixteen," I said. "Maybe we'll get on when we're older."

"I wish I had a sister," she said, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. "I was always jealous of people with siblings. It's lonely being an only child."

There was a barb in there somewhere, too. Roni, the unappreciative.

"Well, I might as well be an only child," said Anton. "My brother's been in Italy for years now. We keep in touch through Facebook, but it doesn't count. He's getting married, apparently."

"Oh, that's nice," said Melody. "Are they having a wedding and everything? Are you going?"

"I dunno. He didn't say anything. I'd like to go to Italy again though. Soon. It's been too long."

He said it as though he was talking about home. It reminded me of the time in high school when he started referring to himself as "Antonio". He tried to make out as if he was an Italian living in South Africa, instead of being the bastard son of some sleazy tourist who had banged his mom for a while in the eighties before bugging off back to the Mediterranean. Anton knew a few Italian catchphrases and he kept some opera in his car. He took every opportunity he could to let people know about his heritage, as if it was a badge, a crown, a trophy. It was like he thought it set him apart from everything that sucked about South Africa. He didn't have to get involved or take a position on anything or feel any of the weight of history. He was an accidental visitor in a horrible zoo, and he could leave whenever he wanted to. It made me mad. None of us were special and I didn't see why he had to be. He was loved enough anyway. He was handsome, he was smart, he was talented. He didn't need to be Italian on top of everything else.

One year, he had a "homemade pizza night" for his birthday. He said he and his mom were going to make them "real Italian style", but, apart from the dodgy mozzarella, I

couldn't find anything special about them. They tasted almost exactly like the ones my mother kept in the freezer. In fact, I wasn't entirely convinced that they weren't out of a box, but everyone likes pizza and the pizza night was a success. Anton wore the Italian flag like a cape, and got drunk on vino and jumped into the pool with all his clothes and on and was almost unanimously adored. *Almost*.

Our food and drinks arrived and we tucked in. I drenched my chips in tomato sauce, Anton salted his vigorously and Melody ate them as they were, delicately, in little bites. She got about five or six bites in per chip. She was drinking bottled mineral water while we drank milkshakes.

Melody started talking about some of the amazing food she'd had on a trip to France the year before, and as I watched her it occurred to me that I'd never had a close female friend. I always kept them at some distance and they did the same to me. A lot of what I did and said around other girls felt like it was determined and inhibited by a set of strict, unspoken rules. We were always showing so much outward affection, but the coldness underneath it all was tangible, like a brick under a goose-down pillow. So often were words and actions peppered with tiny thorns that I sometimes wondered if it was actually possible for a girl to want only the best for another girl of a similar age. It felt like we were competing on some level, carefully, covertly, and seeing as I was a university drop-out, living with my parents and working at a craft shop in the least fashionable area on earth, I didn't have much chance of winning any of these competitions. My only assets were my relationships with Jason and Anton, and the latter wasn't something I cherished. Melody had the respectably challenging childhood, the interesting looks, the education, the travel. Even her name, as annoyingly pretentious as I found it, was a useful tool for her. People never forgot it and always showed interest in it upon introductions and gave her plenty of opportunities to smile and laugh and pretend not to like it and provide some choice exposition about herself and her life. She spoke animatedly, moving her hands around a lot and doing all sorts of things with her eyes. She had greenish-grey eyes; another point of interest.

I thought about Sarah and wondered if she was doing a shift at the craft shop or if she was sitting alone in her room, deep in the ugliest part of Fish Hoek. She was exhausting, but nice. Maybe she was different. I resolved to make an effort with her.

When my chips and milkshake were finished and there was a lull in Melody's monologue, I excused myself to go to the restroom, which was something I liked to do at

some point in every outing. It wasn't about my bladder, it was a mixture of curiosity and the desire to be alone without being antisocial, at least for a few minutes. I enjoyed exploring the facilities at different establishments. Some were crummy and broken and completely covered in graffiti or filth or sometimes both. Others were surprisingly pleasant; artistic even, with fancy mirrors or creative tiling. I often enjoyed the ones that were clinically plain and clean, with washy elevator music piping in through the ceiling and toxic, bright hand soap. They were a sort often encountered in malls, where sometimes there would be a cleaning lady humming in a cubicle as she refilled the paper dispensers or, if the room was deserted, your footsteps would echo on the white tiles. It always felt a little bit exciting inside those creepy cubicles, as though falling victim to murder upon the opening of the cubicle door wasn't entirely out of the question.

The bathrooms at the Brass Bell were run-down and forgettable. I stood for a few minutes at the mirror, and thought about the amount of time Melody must have spent looking herself. She was the sort of person who would look at her reflection in a spoon, a glass, the window of a parked car; discreetly of course, so as not to draw attention to her vanity, but for just long enough to have her beauty affirmed.

Normally I was good at pretending my way through undesirable social encounters, saying what I was expected to say and laughing when I was expected to laugh. I was good at pretending to be interested in things, and good at being a friend to people I would never miss were they to move away and become nothing but words and pictures on Facebook. In the case of Melody-Raine, I wished she would move away. I wished she would go back to England. I could comment on her pictures and her updates about how exciting her life was and pretend to be jealous or amazed. I could pretend that I cared. But I was tired that day. My face wasn't comfortably holding a smile and I was struggling to keep my voice from sounding flat and automated. I couldn't maintain the social energy I had once switched on and off at will. In years gone by, I had been so good at it that I could convince myself with my own acting and end up genuinely enjoying myself with people who normally made me feel bilious and prickly.

An older woman came into the restroom and smiled at me in the way women always smile at each other when they cross paths at the toilets. She shut herself away in the furthest stall but I still heard the toilet seat, the zipper, the lady-like tinkle of urine on dirty porcelain. I pulled open the swinging door and headed back to our table.

My habit of looking at the ground while walking allowed me to get almost all the way back before realising that Anton and Melody weren't there. At first I thought I was disorientated and had gone to the wrong table, but a single sweep of the room confirmed that they weren't in it. My mind felt about for a reasonable explanation and came up with the idea that they had finished up and followed me to the restrooms and that somehow I had missed them passing me. I walked back and hovered around the entrances to the toilets. The woman who had been in there with me came out and smiled at me again. I smiled back and waited until she was out of sight before going back into the restroom and looking around. There was no Melody in there. It was deserted.

I went out, checked our table in case I had missed them while they had been paying the bill somewhere or looking at the view. They weren't there. A buzz of confused anger and panic started up in my head and I made for the exit. Perhaps they were waiting for me just outside. They weren't. I tried calling Anton, but he didn't answer the phone and I didn't have Melody's number.

"Shit," I said, just as some tourists came through the underpass. They glanced sideways at me as they walked into the restaurant. I headed into the tunnel and found myself walking through it during one of the few moments in the busy day that nobody else coming to or from the restaurant was inside. It was just me and the dodgy character in the cap. It was all so obvious, so scripted. He stepped out in front of me as I tried to pass him and with one swift movement of his arm, he moved me against the wall. I was so shocked that I have no memories between that moment and the moment in which I saw him running up the stairs towards the main road, clutching my hand bag.

My almost-mugging the day before had made me terrified and angry, but my actual mugging was too quick and too crowded out by the chaos in my head to have the same effect. I was more angry with Anton and Melody than I was with the mugger. He didn't hurt me, he didn't tease me, he just took the bag and made off with it. I was surprised and my heart was thumping painfully in my throat, and of course I wasn't happy about it, but it didn't feel personal. If anything, it felt inevitable. Perhaps even amusing. I cried anyway, just because I could. It was a perfect opportunity to let off a bit of emotional steam. Nobody could judge me. I was a victim of crime, and some small, vengeful part of me was glad that it had happened, purely because it would make Anton and Melody look even worse for abandoning me at the restaurant. They would have no choice but to feel terrible. I had won.

I left the tunnel, turning my head away as some more restaurant goers passed me so that they didn't see me crying. The sunlight was hot and blinding and I felt dizzy as I scrunched my face up against it. Melody and Anton were at the car, leaning against it, chatting. Melody was pointing at some seagulls that were circling overhead. When they saw me approaching they had big smiles, but as I got closer, the smiles wobbled a bit and then melted.

"Roni, what's wrong?" said Melody. Her face was full of concern. For her reputation, of course, not for me.

"Why did you guys leave me in there?"

"Oh, we, um," she said, looking a bit frantic. She'd been expecting some sort of forced laughter from me, not the reaction she deserved. She wasn't used to getting what she deserved. "You were gone a long time so we thought you'd gone out, we, um..."

"I wasn't gone a long time," I said, keeping my voice level. I looked at Anton. His face was flushed.

"It was just a joke, Roni," he said. "It's not a big deal. Didn't think you'd get so upset..."

He was rubbing the back of his neck and looked very uncomfortable.

"I'm upset because I got mugged in the tunnel."

"What?" Melody's eyes just about shot out of her face. "Oh my God, Roni, we're so sorry. That's such bad luck."

Bad luck. Of course. At that point I could've salvaged the day. I could've forgiven them, laughed a bit, received a few awkward but relieved hugs and gone on exploring Kalk Bay. I could've had a sorbet from the ice cream place on the corner. They would've paid for me, seeing as all my money had been stolen. But I chose not to, and in the silent car trip home, I felt a bit of guilt and a bit of sadness and more than a little self-loathing.

The coast flowed past, craggy and beautiful. The sleepers on the railroad tracks gleamed metallic in the heat. The sandy strips of beaches and the rocks were peppered with sun-loving people. Although the heat was tempered by the sea and its spray, it was still far too hot a day for the beach, in my opinion. There were blobs of flesh laid out on towels, roasting, sizzling. I could imagine the smell; like a pork spit braai without the marinade. Some little kids in underpants were crouched at the water's edge, building sand walls to hold back the sea.

The view and the movement of the car eased a bit of tension I hadn't been aware of until my shoulders slumped down away from my ears for the first time in an hour. Anton was a good driver. He was confident without being reckless and skilled enough with the machine that he could make his passengers forget they were in a car at all. The ride was smooth and flowing. We were like a boat gliding over still water. His car was a nice Renault, which probably helped. It had all the bells and whistles one could ever dream of having in their vehicle. It was nothing like Jason's smoke-farting rattler of a Tazz. I felt myself drifting off as we reached Fish Hoek main road. Anton had some of his Italian opera music playing to ease the awkward silence.

I remembered then that I had planned to "catch up" with Melody that day. When she had suggested the idea at the mall on Sunday, I didn't get the feeling that it was meant to include Anton or anyone else. Perhaps she had chickened out of spending time alone with me and had made these plans with Anton to get away with it. I was grateful.

"I got mugged once," said Anton. It was a story he'd told countless times and each time he would tell it as if it was the first time anyone had heard it. "It was right outside the high school, if you can believe that. I had stayed late for violin practice, so there weren't a lot of people around. Bunch of losers came up to me and pushed me around a bit, asked for my money, my cellphone..."

"Oh, God, that must've been scary," said Melody. She had heard the story before too. It was all Anton had talked about for weeks after it happened, back in grade eleven. "Did you give it to them?" she asked, and then, possibly, realising that the question implied that she had never listened to Anton's story at all the first five hundred times, or that asking a question that she definitely knew the answer to would make her sound stupid, she mumbled "I forget..."

"Didn't have a choice, really," said Anton, enjoying the opportunity to indulge further in the narrative. "There were four of them and they were all older and bigger than me. Luckily I didn't have lots of money on me. Just tuck shop small change. My mom wasn't impressed about the cell phone though. If she had arrived to fetch me on time, it wouldn't have happened." He laughed.

"Funny how these things happen," said Melody.

"Yeah," said Anton. "And life goes on."

An attempt at being profound, directed at me, no doubt. I was the one who had just had my bag snatched and yet I was outside of the conversation, listening in. I was the audience and they were performers, trying to interpret my experiences for me; to put them into context. It wasn't Anton's mother's fault that he'd been mugged. It wasn't their fault that I'd been mugged, either. These things happen. I imagined myself leaning forward and punching Melody in the back of the head and then sitting back calmly and saying "Funny how these things happen. Life goes on."

Back at home, I found my dad, zombieified in front of the TV. He wasn't asleep, but he wasn't totally conscious either. Some programme about Pekingese dogs was on. It had cartoony sound effects inserted in an attempt to make it amusing.

"Dad?"

He came out of his trance and blinked at me foggily for a moment before his eyes cleared and he smiled.

"Hi, sweetie," he said. "Drifting off here. I can't handle this heat. I was going to take a nap upstairs but your mom's in the bed and it's too hot to lie next to her."

I chucked myself onto an armchair. "Pekingese dogs?"

He looked at the TV for a long moment and then laughed. "I was watching something about tigers. It must've ended."

He reached out and took his reading glasses from the coffee table and fumbled them onto his face. They were slightly steamed up from the moment they'd spent in his sweaty hand. He blinked a few times and then unrolled his newspaper and started reading. He had never been good at maintaining casual conversations with his daughters and tended to seek safety in nearby reading material whenever he ran out of things to say. There were always books and magazines and newspapers lying around the house. It was almost as though he scattered them all over the place on purpose, so that there would be something on hand no matter where he found himself cornered by his offspring.

"Dad, I got mugged today," I said, surprising myself. I hadn't intended on mentioning it just yet. It was too hot to discuss such things. It had leaked out of my mouth without my consent.

My father's hands tightened on the paper, crumpling and bending it in the middle. He looked at me with an expression of complete horror on his face.

"What?" he said. "When?"

"In Kalk Bay. I was with friends but we... got separated. A guy grabbed my handbag in the tunnel by the Brass Bell."

"Did you get a look at his face? Did you call the police? Jesus... Did he hurt you?"

"No," I said. "He just took the bag and ran away."

"Lose any valuables?"

"Cell phone, a bit of cash. I don't carry my ID book around anymore. So no big deal, I guess. But it was a nice bag."

My father was blinking at me. He looked as though he wanted to do something about the situation but wasn't exactly sure where to start.

"I'm assuming the Taser didn't help?" he asked.

It was only then that I remembered putting the Taser into the bag the night before. My mugger was now richer, more stylish and better armed.

"Um... it was in the bag."

"Shit."

Vicky slouched in. When she saw us sitting there, she turned around and started slouching out again, but was halted by a question from my father.

"Vicky, do you still have your Taser?"

She flicked a strand of hair out of her face and said "No, I sold it for drug money." She took another step towards the doorway, but my father was having none of it.

"Vicky, stop this nonsense," he said. He tossed the newspaper aside and I could see black ink smudges on his hands. "Come sit down. Your sister got mugged today and the mugger got away with the Taser. I think we need to talk about how to use these things."

She turned reluctantly and looked at me, flicking the same strand of hair with a sharp jerk of her head. The hair fell back in front of her face again immediately. I wanted to grab her by the ear and clip it up for her.

"Sorry, Roni," she said and perched herself on the other armchair. Then she turned to the concerned parent, smouldering on the couch. "I don't use the Taser, dad. It's heavy and embarrassing and if I have to be honest, it freaks me out a bit because I'm more scared that someone will grab it out of my hand and use it on me than anything else. Roni can have it if she misses hers."

My father rubbed his chin and sighed. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you. I just don't really know what to do, short of following you around with a gun..."

Vicky laughed. "Please don't do that. And anyway, I thought you didn't like guns."

"I don't," he said. "But I like criminals even less."

Vicky's face clouded over. She turned it away from us to stare vacantly out of the window. My father had picked up his newspaper again. He held it out in front of him, but his eyes were blank and locked onto nothing and his brow was furrowed with an S-shaped wrinkle of concern. He was clearly too busy fretting about crime to read anything.

I pulled myself out of the chair. It was nearly two thirty and I was going to be late for my shift at the craft shop, which I announced to the other occupants of the room to excuse myself.

"Are you ok to go to work?" my father asked, the furrow deepening. "I can give you a lift if you're not keen on walking."

"No thanks, I want to walk," I said. "I need some fresh air."

I had spent the whole day full of bitterness and self-pity, feeling as though my already unimpressive social network was unravelling around me, but then I stepped outside and felt completely fine. The firemen nodded their heads at me as I passed. I smiled and raised my hand, hoping that the gesture served as a greeting and some sort of indication of respect and thanks. It couldn't be nice spending all day bashing your way through the bushes or lurking around the fire engine in the sun, waiting to be useful. And drinking weak tea. Perhaps it wasn't weak. Perhaps it was coffee and they were spicing it up with something from a hip flask. One of the younger ones looked at me for longer than was necessary. He looked away sooner than was necessary too. He had been hopeful. I was young, I was female... but that was about it. I wasn't fat, but I wasn't elegantly shaped either. My hair was the colour of mud. It didn't shimmer in the sunlight. My face was a collection of averages. There was nothing wrong with me, but there was certainly nothing head-turning about me, either.

I was at peace with my averageness as I headed down the hill. I felt wholesome and healthy. My feet were comfortable in my shoes and the air felt good going into my lungs, despite the tang of fire. The wind had decided to blow the smoke away from us for a while and it wasn't overpowering. I thought perhaps they were getting it under control. Things

certainly seemed a little less chaotic and threatening at that point. I'd had my almost-mugging and my actual mugging and now that those two South African rites of passage were behind me and I had emerged from them unscathed, I had earned the right to be happy, at least for a while.

I crossed the main road and was walking down the avenues when I saw an overweight woman pushing a pram towards me on the pavement. I stepped off the curb as she approached to give her room, looking at my feet, as I often did when passing strangers. She stopped and I looked up and I instantly knew her face. It hadn't always been fat. It had been thin once. The frizzy hair pulled back in a ponytail was the same, as were the little yellow teeth in the fleshy gums. It was Karen. Teddy-bear-abusing, cheese-spread-eating Karen. As if my recent resurgence of Karen-related memories had dragged her back into the world, there she stood.

"Veronica?"

"Karen? Wow, I haven't seen you since high school! Is this your baby?"

I looked down at the creature in the pram. It was also fat, and sleeping with its pudgy hands up against its face.

"This is my baby," she said. "I know what you're thinking!"

She laughed. I didn't even know what I was thinking, so I was interested to hear her opinion on the matter.

"I got married a few years ago. Kenneth, you remember him?"

I didn't.

"Well, we were living in the northern suburbs for a while, but we both missed the beach and the churches, so we decided to move back and raise little Chastity here, where we grew up."

It was the worst name ever. Also, clearly a girl's name. I had thought it looked male, but then there was a pink rabbit in the pram with it which should have given it away. Karen was not progressive enough to give pink toys to a boy. I remembered the sad, one-eyed bear I had attempted to rescue at her house all those years ago. Pink toys weren't only for girls then. They were also suitable for dogs to dismember. This rabbit was one of those horrible twenty-first century toys with exaggerated, sultry-looking eyes. Every girl's doll, even the bunnies, had to look like over made-up tarts. I wondered if Chastity would ever

smear crap all over her eyes and wear short glittery skirts and make her name seem even more hilarious than it already was.

"Wow, congratulations and everything," I said. "She's lovely."

"Thanks," Karen beamed. Everything about her had freaked me out when we were in high school, and she still seemed like someone worth avoiding, but I felt a small amount of happiness for her anyway. She seemed all right. Still, I couldn't help but wonder if any animals were unfortunate enough to be her pets and whether their furniture smelled doggy, the way it had back then. Perhaps Kenneth had sorted her out.

"And how are you doing these days?" she asked.

I was thinking about how best to respond to this question when, to my horror, she nudged me, winked, and said "Still got your eyes on Jason?"

I went rigid with shock, and it must've been very obvious by the look on my face, because Karen started giggling. It was too late to feign ignorance, but I tried anyway.

"What? I don't know..."

"Oh, come on, Roni," she said, slapping me playfully on the arm as if we were good friends. "Everybody could see you had a thing for him. Lord knows why. I take it you've moved on now?"

I felt like something was curdling inside me. My cheeks were sizzling with shame. And rage. I tried to brush the whole thing off with a bit of forced laughter, but Karen wasn't quite done yet.

"You should've just told him how you felt," she said. "You know, I nearly lost Kenneth because I was too chicken to admit my feelings for him. He would've run off with this other girl. He was ready to settle down, you see. I got in, just in time."

So Kenneth almost made it out. What an unfortunate man, to end up married to Karen. Poor Kenneth. I was lost in cruel thoughts, until Karen spoke again.

"Well, I'm sure you have places to be," she said.

We parted company with awkward "goodbye"s and "keep well"s and "it was great to see you again"s and I walked the rest of the way thinking about how bizarre human beings are. How we claim not to appreciate insincerity, but we expect it and we deliver it and we go through life stumbling over all these rituals that we put there ourselves for the purpose of keeping each other happy, even though half of the time it doesn't work. It's all a load of bullshit. I hoped to never see Karen again.

When I arrived at the shop, I saw another, different sort of ritual happening. Carl was sitting outside the shop on an old, buggered deck-chair he had erected on the scrap of grass that grew there. He was drinking whiskey, neat, and paging through a large photo album. He did this every year on the anniversary of his wife's death.

"Veronica!" he said rather loudly, as I approached. "Good morning, my girl."

"Morning, Carl. Another year already..."

"Yes, yes, " he bellowed. "Time flies. She's been gone ten years today. A decade! Ridiculous. It still feels like yesterday. Although things were different then. The valley wasn't so full of people. Things weren't burning to the ground." He waved his hand in the direction of the fire.

I wasn't sure what to say, so I just smiled and headed for the door. I could see Lwando in there, putting change in the till.

"Wait, wait, my girl," said Carl, flapping his hand at me. "Let me tell you something."

I stopped and turned towards him. He was clearly drunk. His face was ruddy. The fact that his wife had been dead for a decade had obviously entitled him to a little more whiskey than normal.

"You know, I never gave a pig's ear for crafts," he said. "Ladies nonsense. She started it, it was her thing. Always knitting and sewing and making junk to sell at the markets. When I say junk, I don't mean the sort of junk they sell there today. Plastic junk from China and junk that fell off the back of a truck... No, she made better junk than that, of course, but I didn't care for it. I still don't."

"Then why do you keep the shop, Carl?" I asked. Normally I wouldn't ask such a question, but he was drunk and I was curious. "Why don't you start a different shop or do something you care about?"

He laughed. "You misunderstand me, my girl. I don't care for crafts, but I care for the shop. It reminds me of her every day."

"Doesn't that make you sad?"

"No! No, it reminds me of her when she was alive! Before she was in the bed. Before she looked like an old witch." He laughed again. "You know, she was very beautiful when she was your age. Red hair and long legs. Every man in Fish Hoek was jealous of me back then."

I tried to imagine this and caught myself smiling.

"Do you have any children, Carl?" I asked, and instantly regretted it. He'd never mentioned any. I had always assumed that they had emigrated, like so many others. Carl smiled a sad sort of smile and sighed. I could smell his whiskey breath even from a distance.

"No children, I'm afraid," he said. "We had a girl once, but she didn't live long. We always planned to have another, but we ran out of time. These things happen."

"I'm sorry, Carl," I said.

He shook his head and took another sip of whiskey. "Nothing to be sorry for, my girl," he said. "Life is what it is. I've been blessed in many ways. Now get to work or I'll have to fire you." He winked at me, and settled back into his deckchair, closing his eyes against the brightness.

University of Cape Town

Day Four. Wednesday. Strays.

You can say what you like about Fish Hoek, but it is redeemed by the hake and chips at the Fish Hoek Fisheries. The place was in completely the opposite direction to the animal shelter, but we made the detour anyway to get our hands on some of that deep-fried goodness before our dog-walking duties. Jason opened his up on the dashboard and ate it while he drove, constantly reaching over to grab a slap chip or a chunk of white meat from in amongst the folds of paper. The left side of his steering wheel was shiny with grease.

"I never see you anymore," I said to him.

"You see me every Wednesday," he said through a mouthful of chip.

"I hardly see you in between Wednesdays."

"You saw me yesterday."

"For like five minutes. Kalk Bay was crap without you. I never know what to say to Melody."

Jason laughed. "Melody. Ja. Fuck. Can't say I was keen to join in on that."

"You could've come along for my sake. They abandoned me at the restaurant and I got my bag snatched."

"Jesus, you've had the worst luck this week. Sorry, Roni."

"Now all I need is for my house to burn down."

He glanced up at the mountains, but there wasn't much to be seen from that angle; just a dirty sky.

"A little less wind and a bit of rain would help," he said.

"Rain? Fat chance."

We drove in silence for a while until I thought of a new conversation topic.

"Guess who I saw yesterday."

"You mean apart from Melody and Anton and..."

"Karen."

"Karen who?"

"Karen! You remember Karen. Religious weirdo from high school. I was friends with her for a while. She has a baby now."

"Oh yeah, Karen."

I wasn't convinced that he knew who I was talking about. It struck me as bizarre how we could have such different memories of school days and possibly of the past in general. I wondered how many things that had been central to my existence at one point or another simply hadn't made an impression on Jason at all. And vice versa. Karen had been memorable because of how uncomfortable she'd made me feel. Her life was full of a complex sort of ickiness that had baffled and scared me and made me aware that there were people who I couldn't relate to properly, even though they had the same language as me, the same education, the same amount of money. I wondered if Jason had ever encountered that feeling before with anyone else. Superiority and distance. Mild, possibly unjustified repulsion.

"I think I might be a snob," I said.

Jason snorted. "You live in Fish Hoek. Your dad drives around in a piece of shit."

"So do you! And I don't mean that sort of snob."

"What other sort of snob is there?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I just feel like I'm better than other people. Like there's something I understand that they don't understand. I don't know what it is though."

"You're a freak."

"Thanks, Jason."

He flicked a piece of chip at me and it stuck on the side of my face. I was gleefully offended and imagined a universe in which it would be appropriate for me to lean over and wrap my arms around him. But we weren't in that universe and I had to make do with sharing some laughter, exaggerated on my part, and poking him lightly in the ribs.

We arrived at the animal shelter and Faiza let us in at the rusty front gate. She was a mess, as usual, with muddy boots and grubby jeans and dog-hair all over her jersey.

"We got some puppies this morning," she told us. "A walker found them in one of those marshy places behind the soccer fields. In a box, taped shut. Two were dead already."

"Jesus," said Jason. "How many did you save?"

"Five," said Faiza. "One is quite weak, he's at the vet now, but the other four are fine. Small border collie mongrel things. They'll find homes. The puppies always do."

"Who would do that?" I asked, trying to imagine myself disposing of a box of live puppies.

"The world is full of sick people," said Faiza. "If something gets in your way, you throw it out. Animals, babies, old people."

"At least you saved some of them," said Jason, trying to steer the conversation in a positive direction.

"Ja," said Faiza. She nodded, but her face was sombre.

The dogs were already slobbering behind the fence, jumping all over each other at the sight of me and Jason. Faiza wrestled them onto their leashes and handed them over to us, three for me, four for Jason, and we headed out towards Long Beach, the pack dragging us along the pavements at a faster pace than we would've achieved without them. Amongst my lot was one of those dogs that would never be adopted. He was a lanky creature with fuzzy, dirty-grey fur. It was as though he was made of dryer lint and the stuff one empties out of a vacuum cleaner. This had earned him the name Hoover Bag, or 'Bag' for short. He had a bit of a mad face, with one funny ear from a fight or something and he looked smelly, even though he wasn't. He was my favourite.

It was windy everywhere, but especially at the beach, where I looked up to see low, dirty clouds racing through the sky. There were a few gulls up there, too, wheeling and folding against the gusts. Loose sand rattled, stinging across the salty expanse, and strands of my hair cut across my face. The beach was all but empty due to the wind, so we let the dogs off their leads and they charged into the open space. Bag emitted a few crusty barks of excitement and started energetically mauling a piece of seaweed.

"What are you doing for your birthday tomorrow?" Jason asked.

"I'm meant to be having a party. Sarah said she would help, but I haven't heard from her today. My house doesn't have the greatest vibe at the moment, though, with the smoke and everything. Plus, parking will be tricky with all the fire engines in the way."

Jason pondered for a moment. "You could use my place," he said. "I can speak to Pam. She won't mind as long as there aren't too many people and it isn't wild."

He didn't need to say it. I didn't know all that many people and it was very unlikely that any birthday party of mine would ever be described as *wild*.

"That would be awesome," I said.

Jason called his grandmother right then and there. He put his phone onto loudspeaker mode so he could hear her through the wind. "Of course, my dear," she said. "Tell Veronica she's welcome. I'll pack all my little knick knacks away so people don't have to worry about breaking them."

Granny Pam was a model elderly person. She managed to be endearingly old-fashioned and open-minded at the same time. She always looked like she was dressed for church, but she spent most of the day reading crime novels and watching TV. She wasn't offended by nudity or language or any of that. My mother's parents had been terribly conservative and Vicky and I had never been close to either of them while they were alive. Grandpa Phil, my only living grandparent, was anything but conservative, but his open-mindedness didn't come with the same neatness and respectability that Granny Pam's did.

Bag was rushing around with a piece of seaweed in his mouth. When he caught sight of me watching him, he bolted towards me and deposited the slimy, sandy treasure onto my feet.

"Good boy," I said, ruffling his fur. It felt like old plush. I picked up the seaweed and threw it as far as I could, then watched Bag rocketing after it with his tongue flapping out the side of his mouth. I would've begged my parents to let me adopt him if Guts hadn't been around. I had far too much respect for that cat to inflict a dog on him, especially a dog like Bag. Even if Bag played by the rules, it would shred the very fabric of Guts' existence if he moved in, and I thought Guts would probably be so put out about it that he would run away to prove a point.

Jason was running around with some of his dogs. They were getting under his feet and he almost tripped a few times. His hair was blowing wild in the wind. It didn't flow around like straight hair; it sort of stretched and wobbled. Nothing about Jason was sleek or graceful. He had a stodgy wholesomeness, like oats with brown sugar and milk on a wintry morning. He wasn't typically attractive, but I wasn't the only one to have fallen for his warm face and his rich voice and his bright laugh. There had been plenty of girls in high school who

had shown interest in him. Many of them were girls like me, with forgettable faces and modern ideas about romance. I could appreciate the sculpted bodies and chiselled features of boys like Anton, but I didn't particularly want them near to me. I didn't want to share all my secrets with them or have them hugging me with all those angles and firm surfaces. I didn't want to feel like I had to beautify myself every morning to appear worthy of their company.

"Roni, what the hell are you gawking at?" he called across the sand.

"You!" I yelled back, wondering if he would read anything into that. He didn't. Instead, he went down on his haunches, scooped up a handful of sand and lobbed it at me. The wind wasn't exactly in his favour and he missed by miles, more of it flying back at him than anything else.

"Shit!" he laughed, as he realised his mistake. My return fire hit him square on the side of the head and I felt a bit bad knowing it would take him ages to get all the sand out of his ear. A few of the dogs had become very excited by the flying sand and were jumping around in the space between us, hoping to catch the next throw. We lobbed sand balls around for a while until the dogs were sufficiently filthy and happy, and then decided to walk to the wreck.

The rusted skeleton of the Kakapo looked more like a collection of abandoned metal things than a ship. It was out in the middle of nowhere, far from both ends of the beach, and the wind swirled around it, sand hissing against its bones. The boiler was the main attraction, with its accessible nooks and crannies full of sand and trash and odd socks and condoms. The shape and size of the original vessel were marked out by the ends of crumbling metal ribs that protruded from the sand. They looked almost wooden with decay. The dogs got straight to work pissing all over the poor wreck, while Jason tugged at one of the gnarled metal poles causing the whole area to vibrate under our feet.

"Stop it," I said.

"Why? It's not going to break. And even if it did, it's a wreck..."

He was right and couldn't tell him that I felt sorry for the ship. Having an emotional reaction to a pile of scrap metal isn't something one should advertise. It's not like I'd had any connection with the ship when it was still a ship. It had wrecked itself more than a hundred years ago. I leaned against the boiler, feeling its warmth against my back, and I looked out at the sea. It was choppy and hazy. There was a lone surfer on the water, but he

didn't seem to be having any success. The sea looked dark and merciless and the thought of being in it made me shiver. Bag had finished his pissing duties and came and sat next to me, leaning his warm, salty body against my leg.

"You should adopt that thing," said Jason.

"Guts would never forgive me," I said. "And my mom wouldn't go for it anyway. She doesn't like dogs."

"I'm not really a dog person, either."

"You're not? Then what the hell are you doing walking dogs every Wednesday?"

He shrugged. "It's nice. We get to hang out, take a walk, do a good deed. I don't *dislike* dogs, or anything. I'm just not dog crazy. I like them the same as cats."

I fought back my smile, but it surfaced as a blush instead. *He didn't do it for the dogs.* I smiled, tickled Bag on the head and had him slobber all over my fingers. We headed back, happy dogs in tow, and I felt immensely happy too despite the wind and the sand and the fire-stained sky in the distance.

When we got back to the shelter, Faiza looked grim. "The weak puppy passed away," she said, before we had a chance to ask her what was wrong. "The vet just called to say so."

"While we were gone? Just now? Shit," Jason looked at the ground.

"So, ja. Four survivors. Come have a look."

We shepherded the salty dogs into the back yard where another volunteer took them from us, then followed Faiza into the house. The puppies were in a sort of raised cot full of old blankets. Two of them were sleeping and the other two were carelessly clambering over their siblings, flopping and wriggling like seals.

"Oh my god, I want one," said Jason.

"Then take one!" said Faiza, elbowing him lightly. "Come on man, they need homes."

"My grandmother would kill me," he said. "We have three cats. And anyway, I'm not really a dog person..."

"So what, take one and see what your granny says. They always say no until they see the puppy. And then they change their minds."

Jason laughed. "No, I really couldn't, I..."

"Jason!" Faiza said, staring straight into his eyes and silencing him. "Take a puppy. If you grandmother says no, then bring it back. What do you say."

Jason swallowed uncomfortably. "Um... ok. I guess. This is insane. I haven't thought about this at all..."

"So don't think," said Faiza. "People spend too much time thinking and not enough time doing. You know? *Do something*. Take a puppy. And you Veronica?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, Faiza. If I had to take any dog it would be Bag, but I just can't."

She looked disappointed, but she didn't argue. She was more interested in making sure she'd conquered Jason. Her eyes snapped back onto him.

"So choose one," she said.

Jason looked like he was panicking a little bit, but there was a smile tugging at his lips too.

"How do I choose?" he laughed. "They're all equally fluffy and squishy."

Without even looking into the cot, Faiza reached out and seized one of the puppies and handed it to Jason.

"There," she said. "That's your puppy."

Jason lifted the little creature up to his face and inspected it. "Patches," he said. "My grandpa had a dog named Patches. It died around the same time he did. Maybe my gran will let me keep him if I call him Patches."

"It's a she," said Faiza. "They're all shes."

"She. Ok. I'll call her Patches."

Patches was curled up in my lap on the trip back. Jason didn't drop me off at home because he wanted me to hold the puppy all the way back to his place. I walked home from there, choosing not to hang around for Granny Pam's reaction. When I got up the hill, I saw Josh Bergstein from across the road pouring drinks for the firemen and handing them around.

"Hey, Veronica," he said as I approached, and smiled.

"Hey," I said. It seemed rude not to say anything else to him when he was smiling at me so broadly, so I informed him of my birthday party plans for the next day. "Would you like come? Jason's house is just down the road, near the little park. I'll put balloons on the door."

"Sounds great," he said. "Thanks. I guess I'll see you then."

I felt pretty good about myself as I made my way down the driveway and into my house. I had just casually and successfully invited a boy I didn't know very well to my birthday party, in person, in front of a bunch of strangers. I wished Melody could've been there to see how smooth I was about it. It occurred to me shortly afterwards that if Melody had been present, I probably would've stumbled over my words, or said something idiotic. In fact, it probably wouldn't have occurred to me to invite him at all. I would've been so awkward, that I would've greeted him and left it at that. Melody's gaze had that effect on me. Around her, I was always a great, clumsy beast.

I yelled a general greeting to whoever was in the house and then went straight to my bedroom, where I pushed Guts off my chair and turned on my computer. Jason was online and I asked him how Granny Pam had reacted to the puppy. Her reaction wasn't what he had been expecting at all.

Jason says:

She started crying when I told her its name. She wasn't angry at all, just emotional.

Roni says:

Ag shame man. She misses your grandpa.

Jason says:

Ja. Well anyway, looks like we're keeping the puppy.

Jason says:

:)

Patches was lucky. I knew Jason would do a good job caring for her, whether he was a dog person or not. His house was clean and safe and both he and Granny Pam were tender, caring people. I thought about Karen again. She'd been on my mind a lot. She'd had lots of pets. I remembered her telling me about all the animals from her past that were either dead or missing. I'd been horrified. She'd had so many pets that she couldn't even remember all of them. These creatures were just creatures, bought on a whim, entertaining as babies and then forgettable and replaceable once matured and smelly. I knew this wouldn't happen to Patches. On one of my few dreaded visits to Karen's house, I remember cuddling her cat while she was in the kitchen making us white-bread-and-cheese-spread sandwiches. I wasn't just cuddling the cat because I liked cats. I was cuddling it because I felt sorry for it and I wanted it to know what it felt like to be loved. I was convinced that Karen

was, amongst other things, some sort of twisted, sub-human animal neglecter. This poor cat was scruffy with gooey eyes and an ugly nose; sun spotted and lumpy and, in retrospect, probably cancerous. It's name was Kitkat. I wasn't sure if it was male or female. It had a screechy sort of voice and it made me want to cry. There had been a dog there, too, a terrier of some sort, but it was edgy and it let out a low growl whenever I came near it, so I left it well alone.

In high school, Anton had an elegant brown-and-white whippet named Gelato. He wasn't neglected like Karen's dog, but I had also felt sorry for him. He was trained and neutered and always well groomed and fed, and yet he always seemed sad. Anton's mother was forever buying him fancy new collars. Once, she bought him one that was velvety and studded with false jewels. It went missing days later and she shouted the dog as if he had lost in on purpose. I suspected that someone had stolen it right off his neck. Whenever I visited Anton's place, which was something Jason and I used to do quite frequently back in those days, Gelato would usually be skulking around at the garden fence, looking through the gaps in the wooden slats as if he wanted nothing more than to run away from the manicured lawns of the Polieri household and roll himself vigorously in a pile of excrement or a festering dead thing. If he so much as tracked a bit of mud into the house, Anton's mother would bark at him. She never abused him, but he was a sensitive creature, and seeing his tail curl between his legs and his head drop in shame at being told off, was always very upsetting to me. I would attempt to console him on those occasions, and he would press his face against the leg of my pants. If dogs cried tears, I'm sure there would've been wet patches on the fabric when he moved away.

Anton was never much into animals. To my immense irritation, Jason had invited him to join us in walking the dogs for the animal shelter, shortly after we had started volunteering together. Anton came along once, but after that he made excuses every week until Jason stopped asking him. I was quite relieved about that, as the dog-walking was my only guaranteed one-on-one time with Jason every week. On the rare occasions that Jason wasn't able to walk the dogs as a result of him being sick or having to help Granny Pam with something, I always felt very cheated. I liked the dogs, and I liked the feeling of doing something good, but my heart was heavy when I walked out onto the beach without Jason. Things that would normally throw the two of us into fits of laughter, like a dog dropping a manky piece of seaweed onto a stranger's beach towel or sniffing at the backside of a child

digging in the sand, barely brought a smile to my face when I was alone. I wondered if the dogs ever picked up on it. Sometimes, I was convinced that they looked melancholy when I was feeling that way myself, even if I tried to fake enthusiasm for them.

Guts was sitting at my feet, trying to stare me off the chair so that he could occupy it again. I obliged him by getting up and chucking myself onto my bed. He promptly hopped back onto the chair, kneaded it with his claws a few times and then settled himself into the form of a ginger cake. I stared at the ceiling for a while, thinking about all the creatures living behind the walls and fences of suburbia and tried to imagine the sort of person who would leave a box of live puppies in a swamp. Puppies always find homes. Faiza had said so. Patches had found her happy ending and the rest of the puppies were sure to find homes too. It was the other dogs I felt the most sorry for. The ugly ones, like Bag. They'd had it rough for a long time already, and now that they were cranky and tattered, nobody wanted them. I drifted off.

Sarah called just after midday, waking me up.

"Hey, Roni," she said, sounding chipper, as always. "You wanna come with me to buy some stuff for you birthday party? I'll pick you up."

"I guess we can go to the mall, yeah."

"Great, I'm on my way."

"See you soon."

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat there blinking for a while, trying to clear my head. So often I was sucked into sleeping in the afternoons and I almost always regretted it. Sinking down was easy enough, but waking up was a chore, crawling back into the world, boiled and bent and wrung out. It was particularly bad when I left my curtains open and the sun's brightness would sear through my eyelids and plant terrible headaches that blossomed behind my eyes as I woke. I was spared, that afternoon, by the haziness of the sky. The sun was dark and red from the smoke instead of piercingly brilliant and I only had the brain fog to contend with. I took a long drink from a glass of stale water that stood on my bedside table.

I was still busy defogging when my bedroom door squeaked open and Vicky stepped in. This wasn't something she did very often, preferring to keep herself holed up in her own bedroom unless she needed food, television or maternal approval. My mother would moan

at her if she hid away for too long and Vicky hated the moaning. She stood just one step over the metal floor strip in my doorway that marked the boundary of my room. Her mouth was drawn to one side, thoughtfully.

"I was walking past... I heard..."

She sniffed, and scratched behind one of her ears. "Can I get a lift with you to the mall?"

"Sure, I can ask Sarah. Sure she won't mind. You meeting people?"

"Yes. Well, no, I just need to pick up a few things."

"Ok?"

I waited for more information, but it wasn't forthcoming. Just as I pushed my feet into my permanently laced-up shoes, I heard the friendly hoot from outside. Sarah had already arrived.

"Let's go," I said to Vicky, who was still hovering in my doorway.

Sarah was, of course, more than happy to give Vicky a lift. Vicky was polite, but in a robotic sort of way. She didn't respond much to Sarah's bold friendliness. I wanted to elbow her and give her a look, but she was in the back seat, out of reach. Sarah turned up the radio and then started talking over it, a strange habit of hers. I thought perhaps she liked the space to be filled with the sound of voices and that hers alone wasn't enough. I wasn't as silent as Vicky, but I wasn't a major contributor to conversations, either, particularly not with Sarah. I just didn't know what to say to her. Not yet, anyway. For me, the ability to be chatty with somebody was something that developed slowly, over time. Sarah went on and on about her great aunt and the craft shop and something amusing that Lwando had said to her. At the first stop street, she gestured towards a poster of Kyle Nunes, which was strapped onto a lamppost, and started talking about his disappearance.

"Terrible thing, poor little boy," she said. "Did you know him, Roni?"

Vicky opened her mouth unexpectedly and said "He was always running around in the streets here, chasing birds and building mud castles in the gutters and stuff like that. He nearly got run over a few times. One person even complained to his parents. Told them to keep him inside or teach him some street smarts. He would've been easy to kidnap, because his parents were never watching him."

"Poor little boy," Sarah said again. "Still, he's only been gone a few days. Maybe he'll be back."

"The kidnappers didn't ask for a ransom, so it's not about money," said Vicky. "I don't think they're going to bring him back."

We stopped talking for a while after that, and the voices on the radio sounded intrusive over the silence. While we contemplated the plight of missing children, they were talking about celebrities who shouldn't have been considered interesting even in their own countries, let alone in ours. As if their cars and their tweets and their sordid affairs were relevant to anybody, anywhere. I wanted to turn the radio off, but it wasn't my radio. The banter tapered off and was replaced by some horrible music with cookie cutter lyrics.

Goodbye... I cry... Mistake... heartbreak...

Obvious rhymes, endlessly recycled and warbled over some horrible synthetic noises and a mechanical beat. The singer didn't seem to be aware that she was singing about love lost and emotional turmoil. She could've been singing about anything.

Pain in my heart... Tears us apart... This love is real... All I can feel...

We arrived at the mall and Sarah parked, awkwardly, at the far entrance next to a withered little tree that was failing to provide any shade in the parking lot. It was hot there, despite the wind. A few sweaty car guards were ambling about. It wasn't the right weather for car theft and they knew it. I greeted the one nearest to us and he nodded. I could see beads of sweat glistening on top of his smooth head, which would've been burnt to a scabby crust if he had Sarah's complexion. She must've put on sunscreen every day in summer to avoid having her face fried off upon leaving the house. I felt the sun blistering my arms and I scrunched my eyes up against the glare. The car park rippled with the heat. Vicky looked uncomfortable, too, shrinking inwards like a vampire trying not to burst into flames. Only Sarah seemed unaffected, marching forward towards the mall with her head held high and the sun in her face. She wasn't physically equipped for Africa but she made up for it with a certain hardness, a bluntness of character. She seemed to be oblivious to so many things.

Inside the mall it was cold, as usual. The heat outside had made me forget to bring something warm to defend myself against the daytime air conditioning and I walked with my arms folded tightly in front of me. Vicky was accosted outside the video store by a bunch of her dodgy-looking friends who had just walked out of there with some trashy DVD and

gumballs from the vending machine. The meeting was clearly unplanned, and she didn't seem particularly pleased to see any of them.

"Hey, Pete, Julie, Orbs," she said, greeting the three who approached her. I looked up quickly to see who "Orbs" was and recognised him as one of the people she'd been with on Monday when I had watched her come up the street. The chubby girl with the black hair was also there. She was sullen and unremarkable, despite the effort she'd put into her outfit and hair dye. Orbs, on the other hand, was fascinating, but not in a good way. He was twitchy and jittery and the dark glances he kept throwing at me and Sarah were very intense, as if he wasn't simply annoyed about us being present, but would actually have liked to see us die in pain, right there at his feet. Vicky had arranged her face so that she appeared reasonably enthusiastic to see her friends and agreed to join them for milkshakes at the Spur. I was a bit uncomfortable about the whole thing. I had heard her saying to Orbs that she didn't want to see him, that she would call the cops... It was most likely a load of teenage bullshit – shoplifting or vandalism or driving without a licence – but Vicky looked unhappy. I couldn't admit to her that I'd overheard her conversation and I figured that they couldn't get up to too much trouble in a crowded shopping mall anyway, so I told her I'd call her when we were done shopping and left her there.

"Your sister's friends seem... interesting," said Sarah. "Not what I would've expected."

"I never know what to expect with Vicky," I said. "I feel like I hardly know her sometimes."

"But she's your sister! I wish I had a sister..."

"No, you don't. Not one like Vicky, anyway."

I felt guilty after saying that. I had meant something slightly different to what had actually come out of my mouth, but I couldn't hope to explain it to Sarah right then. She didn't say anything else on the topic, so I chose to leave it there.

Further along the mall, there was a woman handing out flyers. Sarah took one from her as we passed. I looked down at it and saw Kyle Nunes' face staring up at me, and then turned around to get another look at the woman. It was his mother. I hadn't been paying her any attention so I hadn't recognised her at first. She was a small, thin woman who I had seen around the neighbourhood prior to Kyle's disappearance. I remembered her always

looking a little untidy, but she had deteriorated noticeably since I'd last seen her. Her face was haggard and patchy and her clothes seemed oversized, hanging on her bony form.

"Have you seen this boy?" she said quietly, holding up one of the flyers to a group of middle-aged women who were walking by. They all shook their heads. One of them took a flyer.

We continued walking and Sarah sighed.

"Shame," she said, folding up the piece of paper and slipping it into her pocket. "It must be so horrible to have your child go missing. And right before Christmas..."

"It feels so wrong getting ready for a party when there's shit like that going on," I said.

"There's nothing you can do, Roni. Just hope for the best. Life goes on."

"I hope his life goes on..."

"Me too." She squeezed my arm affectionately. "Now let's start shopping and stop thinking about depressing things, just for a while."

She started walking, faster than I'd ever seen another human being walk, the rest of the way down the length of the mall and into the Pick n Pay. Even though I considered myself to be a pretty quick walker, I struggled to keep up with her without breaking into a run from time to time. She was either very keen to get our minds off the missing child, or very excited to start shopping. Perhaps a bit of both. She fetched a trolley; not a little basket-carrier, but one of the full-sized ones. Vicky always referred to them as hobo-trolleys because of the number of homeless people who rattled around the suburbs pushing all their worldly belongings in ones they'd stolen from the parking lots near supermarkets.

"We only need one or two things, don't we?" I asked Sarah. "I can just hold the stuff..."

"Relax, Roni," she said. "Where should we start?"

Where indeed? I'd never been a great mall enthusiast and supermarkets terrified me. As a small child I'd been separated from my mother many times during her grocery shopping and remembered clearly the fear and the despair. I remembered walking as fast as I could down the centre aisle, looking left and right through the forests of people; indifferent women and uncomfortable men, some contemplating prices and quantities, others boldly grabbing at things that would end up in the trash soon enough. My mother was never overwhelmed. She had a system, taking each aisle quickly but carefully even if

she thought she didn't need anything from all of them. She never forgot to buy anything she needed. She was a machine, which is probably why she lost me so often. My mind would wander and I'd find myself fixating on some colourful breakfast cereal or a dead fish on ice at the seafood counter, and my mother would be gone.

"Let's start at one end and just work our way through," I said. "Then we won't forget anything."

"Cool."

Sarah turned and started speeding off towards the detergents and the pet food. She was a menace with the trolley and several ladies gave her disapproving stares as she tanked past them. It was a good thing she didn't drive with quite the same recklessness. Her driving was more clumsy than dangerous; more distracted than determined. I thought perhaps it was the prospect of organising my birthday party that was firing her up. The trolley rattled and its wheels squeaked frantically and when she brought it to a stop in the deserted far aisle, the silence was startling.

"Ok," she said quietly, as if we were crouching in a trench and planning a stealth attack. "I guess we could get some of these absorbent cloths in case someone spills a drink."

It was going to be a long shopping experience.

We walked out of the Pick n Pay straining under the weight of our purchases, the plastic packets stuffed to tearing point with sweet and savoury snacks, drinks, assorted condiments, chip dips, paper plates and cups, plastic cutlery, a punch bowl and ladle, serviettes, toothpicks, candles, streamers, balloons, absorbent cloths in case someone spilled a drink...

Sarah's enthusiasm was appreciated but also exhausting, and I kept thinking about my bed. Even when I wasn't at home it was trying to lure me into daytime sleeping that I would regret afterwards. We were passing the pharmacy when I remembered that I had to call Vicky to tell her we were done. Struggling to hold all my packets with one arm, I dug my phone out of my handbag and found Vicky's number. I called her and was surprised to hear Vicky's familiar and very irritating pop song ring tone start up somewhere nearby. She was standing at the pharmacy counter, paying for something in cash with her one hand and fumbling with her phone with the other. I started walking towards her and she spotted me and quickly stuffed her purchase into the pocket of her jeans.

"Hey, you're done," she said. "Good. I'm starving. Let's get out of here."

"Sorry we took so long," I said. I would've given an explanation involving Sarah and the hobo-trolley, but Sarah had just come back into earshot. "What did you buy?"

"Vitamins," said Vicky.

Of course, they weren't vitamins, and once we were home, I resolved to find out what they were. Emboldened by my previous mission into Vicky's bedroom, in which I had discovered her box of letters, I crept in again as soon as I heard her turn on the shower. The room was a mess, with clothes all over the floor and her cupboard doors and drawers hanging open. She had a small black dress, a pair of black pumps and a few bits of jewellery arranged on her bed. She was getting ready for a night out. The jeans she had been wearing at the mall were in a crumpled heap on the floor with the rest of the clothes, and I searched the pockets. They were empty. Her desk and her dressing table were littered with papers and make-up but no pharmacy packets. I pulled open the drawer of her bedside table which was the only closed drawer in the room and there it was. Her phone was in there too and I snatched it up and started searching through her messages. Beccs, Zanele, Julie, Beccs, Pete, Beccs, Aubs... *Aubs*. Orbs. My brain reconfigured the name and I opened the message thread. My heart was thumping in my throat and my hands were shaking slightly.

c u lata bitch. and rememba, if u tell any1, i'll fucken kill u. haha

I closed the messages and chucked the phone back into the drawer as if it had stung me. My stomach churned uncomfortably. I picked up the brown paper pharmacy packet and tipped its contents into my hand. Sleeping pills. Two different kinds. One in a plastic bottle, one in a cardboard box containing a blister pack. I didn't have any time to think about what I had found because just then, Vicky stepped into the room wrapped in a towel. We were very surprised to see each other.

"Roni, what the fuck!"

I held up the pills. "These are not vitamins."

"What the fuck!" she said again.

"Vicky, why do you have sleeping pills?"

My mind was suddenly flooded with images of Vicky stuffing handfuls of sleeping pills into her mouth; Vicky retching and vomiting and convulsing; Vicky foaming at the mouth; Vicky dead with her eyes open and her face pallid.

"Why do you have sleeping pills?" my voice warbled a bit the second time.

She closed the door behind her.

"They're not prescription pills, Roni," she said.

Her voice was low. She didn't want our mother overhearing us. I looked down at the pills again and felt stupid. They were obviously herbal. Over-the-counter. Nothing dangerous.

"Then why are you hiding them?"

"It's got fuck-all to do with you. Why are you in my room?"

"I thought you were showering..."

"I was. I forgot my shampoo."

She strode over to her dressing table and snatched up the shampoo bottle.

"Get out of my room."

"Why are you hiding the sleeping pills?"

The question sounded lame, now that I knew they were herbal. I didn't want to slink back to my room as if nothing was going on. Something was going on, but I couldn't admit that I'd fiddled with her phone. She would've seen that as the ultimate violation. I could see her eyes darting towards the open drawer from where she stood. She knew the phone was in there and she wanted to protect it from me. Herbal sleeping pills were all I had to interrogate her about.

"Why are you hiding the sleeping pills?" I said again, trying harder to make it sound as though having a stash of herbal sleeping pills was a big deal.

"I'm not hiding them!" she said. "It's just got nothing to do with you, that's all."

"You can't sleep? Is everything ok?"

"There's nothing wrong with me, I just can't get to sleep sometimes," she snapped.

"Everything is fine."

"Why can't you sleep?"

"Enough questions."

She tightened the towel around herself and opened the door.

"You can get out now," she said.

"Are you sure you're ok?"

"Out."

I put the pills back into the drawer, pushed it shut gently and walked out. Vicky's eyes burned into the back of my head as I made my way down the passage and into my own room. Before I shut my own door, I got a look at her face. She had mascara smudged under her eyes and her hair was damp and stringy. She looked old.

Downstairs, there were raised voices. My father was home and my mother was onto him. He had committed one of his usual crimes – sitting down on the couch without changing his filthy overalls, tramping dirt into the house, helping himself to milk straight out of the milk bottle and then failing to put the bottle back into the fridge – and now his deep voice was providing the bass line for my mother's shrill soprano.

"Every day!" she shrieked. "Every day! Can't you be considerate? Just once in a while!"

"Calm yourself woman..."

"Woman? I have a name, you piece of shit!"

"So do I..."

"That's all you see me as, isn't it? Your *woman*. And when I'm all stooped and wrinkled from slaving away to keep things tidy around you, you'll just trade me in for a younger model, won't you?"

"Brenda, what – ?"

"I'm sick of this, Len! I'm sick of feeling so..."

"So what? I honestly don't have a clue what's going on with you, Bren. You're being completely ridiculous."

And then she burst into tears. "You know things are getting serious between your father and that slut?" she said.

"What on earth does that have to do with anything?"

"They've bought a new place. And a bird. A lovebird!"

"How is this even – ?"

"You're just like him, Len, you're *just like him*!"

I heard my father choke slightly on a laugh. "You... you think I'm going to leave you for some nubile young thing? You think I'm some sort of clone of my father?"

"I..."

"Jesus, Brenda!"

There were stamping footsteps coming up the stairs. I didn't know which of them was ascending, but I didn't want to intercept either of them, so I slipped into my bedroom and shut the door.

University of Cape Town

Day Five. Thursday. Facts of Life.

"How does it feel to be twenty-two?"

Much the same as it feels to be twenty-one, and yet very different, too. Twenty-one is the last of the noteworthy birthdays that aren't somehow depressing: thirty, forty, seventy... When you hit twenty-two, you can feel your teenage years fading away behind you and thirty just starting to peek above the horizon. I never considered thirty to be old, but I knew that when I eventually reached it, I'd have to act old, and eight years didn't sound like enough time to figure everything out. I couldn't be living with my parents. I'd have to be settled somewhere, earning money, doing something with my life. Would I be alone?

My mother woke me up with pancakes. I say she woke me up, but really I was already awake and just pretending to be sleeping, because it was something I'd always done. I liked the gentleness of people when they thought they were waking me up.

"Veronica?" Her voice was soft, like the weight of her hand on my shoulder.

I surfaced groggily, feeling as though I actually had been woken up. The pancakes, which I had smelled on their arrival in my bedroom, looked amazing. They were prepared in my favourite way: rolled up with chopped bananas and golden syrup inside and topped with cinnamon sugar and a squirt of lemon juice.

After wolfing down the pancakes, I pulled on a light jersey to hide the transparency of my summer pyjamas and came downstairs. After a brief and awkward hug from my father, I was presented with a small, square box, wrapped in blue with a green ribbon

around it. I took it, shook it gently and felt a tingle of curious excitement run up the back of my neck.

"Open it!" he said.

Vicky was slouched against the wall, watching me darkly. She'd mumbled something along the lines of "Happy birthday", as I had descended the stairs, but that was it. I glanced at her, and saw something that resembled jealousy clouding her face. The curious tingle intensified with the idea that Vicky might know what was in the box and want it for herself. I slipped the ribbon off the box and pulled away the paper. Inside was a key with a rubber, star-shaped key ring attached, and outside on the driveway was the beautiful little silver scooter that went with it.

"We would've loved to buy you a car, but this will have to do for now," my mother said. Despite this apology of sorts, her eyes were twinkling in amongst her smile-wrinkles and I could see she was chuffed. As was I. Until that moment, I had never understood how people could be attached to their vehicles. My scooter was perfect; so neat and shiny and full of purpose.

"There's this, too," my father said, handing me another, bigger box. It contained a silver helmet to match the scooter and a chamois cloth to wipe it down.

I rode around our street to get the feel of it, the tangy fire-wind against my face and a light feeling inside me. I was out of the quicksand. I was free. It felt like the beginning of a new chapter in my life, in which I was moving at the same pace as everyone else. If the fire were to grow suddenly and race down the mountain towards me, I could get away from it. I was invincible.

The feeling ebbed a little when I saw Vicky watching me from the window, laughing so hard that there were tears in her eyes. I caught my reflection on the side of a parked fire-engine and felt suddenly self-conscious and nerdy with my piss-pot helmet head jutting out in front of me and my jersey flapping.

I parked the scooter in the driveway and headed back inside to get ready for the day. In the house, my parents were bickering about something irrelevant. As I passed them, my father held out an envelope to me and cut my mother off to say "Veronica, your grandfather sent you this."

"Don't get too excited," my mother said. The corners of her mouth were turned down. "He's terribly cheap."

I took the envelope from my father who shook his head. "Do you have to insult my father every time we have a conversation..."

"I can insult him as much as I like!" she said. "It's probably his fault you are the way you are, and I don't owe him any respect, after the way he treated your mother."

"He treated her like an angel. He worshipped her," said my father, his voice growing louder.

"And ran off with that slut before she was even cold in her grave! Don't try to tell me that girl wasn't on the scene before Maria passed!"

"Brenda, I've had about enough of this –"

"For fuck's sake, could you not do this on my birthday?" I yelled.

They both fell silent and looked at me. Then my mother stamped off towards the kitchen and my father picked up his newspaper and started reading it.

I had a birthday bash when I turned eighteen. It felt like the right thing to do at the time. Matric had just ended and everyone thought they were amazing and invincible. Three from our class had already died by that stage; two in a drunk driving incident, and one from an overdose. Lots of people were getting tattoos and piercings. There were a few pregnancy rumours. School was over. I invited all of my friends and a few people who weren't my friends to my birthday party. My parents had rented out the Moth Hall near the Fish Hoek library. We didn't do much in terms of decorating, but that was appropriate. Fashionable, even. It was dark and dusty and there were trestle tables with snacks and some random guy from school that I hardly knew had set up a big sound system and agreed to be the DJ, free of charge. The whole affair didn't really suit me and I was uncomfortable the entire time. I kept having to remind myself that it was my party and not some stranger's party that I was gate-crashing. It didn't seem as though half of the people present knew it was my party anyway. People brought their own guests and I'm fairly certain that a few strangers cruised in from the street hoping to find free alcohol.

My main memory from the event was Melody getting drunk and dancing in the middle of the room. She wasn't as pretty then, but she was confident and the alcohol transformed her into the attention stealing creature she would become permanently a few years later. She danced with abandon, the left strap of her dress sliding elegantly off her shoulder, the skirt whirling around and revealing a not inconsiderable amount of flawless

thigh. She started off dancing alone but soon there people dancing all around her, like magpies drawn to a shiny object. She tossed her hair and laughed and draped herself on people for photographs, her earrings sparkling, her lipstick immaculate. I remember sitting and watching her and pondering whether or not I should tuck into the booze with greater intent.

Disliking somebody for complicated abstract reasons is a miserable undertaking. I tried to write it off as jealousy, but before that night, there hadn't been much to be jealous of. Besides, I had been jealous of plenty of other people without feeling any of the acidic bubbling in my gut that I experienced with Melody and, in a different way, with Anton, too. It was exhausting and consuming and isolating and pointless.

Anton was there, laughing and dancing. He wasn't much of a fan of Melody-Raine, either, one of the few things I had in common with him, but I wondered that night if it would change. Melody left for London a few weeks after that, so nothing happened then and it was such a relief to have her far away. But now she was back and the memories of how I felt that night in the dark hall were creeping into my thoughts.

I'm twenty-two now, I need to shake this off. It's so pathetic. It's so high school. We're not teenagers anymore. Adults don't hold silly grudges and get miserable about such petty nonsense. Of course that isn't true at all. My mother's feelings towards my grandfather and his young girlfriend were proof of that.

On my eighteenth birthday party, Jason had cleared a space on one of the tables and spelled out the message "Happy birthday Roni!" in Jelly Tots. He was too self-conscious about his weight at the time to get involved in the dancing. I loved him more than ever that night.

For my twenty-second, I had invested in a black party dress. It was simple, but not boring; pretty, but not ridiculous. At least that's what I thought when I purchased it. It seemed like a solid choice. To be honest, anything that wasn't jeans and a shirt felt ridiculous after I'd been in it for a few minutes. I couldn't count the number of times in first-year that I'd got all dressed up in skirts or dresses to go out, and then changed back into my jeans and shirt just before leaving the house. I had to really lecture myself as I stood in front of the mirror to avoid packing the dress away. *It looks fine. It looks nice. It's your birthday.*

It's a waste of money if you take it off. Live a little. Stop caring so much about what people think.

My legs were unpleasantly white. My posture made the dress sag a little in the front. I had spent a lot of time pinning up my hair and it looked strange. I stood up straight, squared my shoulders, stared myself down for a while, and managed to leave the house without my jeans.

It was a decision I regretted shortly after walking out of the front door, when I tried to mount my scooter. Riding my scooter to the party was something I really wanted to do, even though Jason's house was within easy walking distance. I wasn't going to let my outfit get in the way. Being unfamiliar with the machine, plus the added stress of having my legs apart with the dress on made the ride extremely awkward. I did my best to tuck bits of the dress under my thighs to avoid exposing myself to random pedestrians. Thankfully there were very few people about as I made my way to Jason's. I kept my head low and hoped that the helmet was doubling up as a disguise. Impracticalities and self-consciousness aside, it was great fun. I took it slow, not wanting to show up covered in tar grazes – even so, it felt great, like I was soaring down the hill. The air whipped my face and cooled my hot skin, and I felt like I was breathing in fresh, oxygen-rich air for the first time in months. At one point, when I was sure that there was nobody around to witness it, I let a yell burst out of my mouth; the sort normally reserved for rollercoasters or bungee jumping.

The dress and I arrived successfully, but my hair was ruined. I pulled all the pins out and shook it loose before knocking on Jason's door.

"Hey, Roni, happy birthday!" he said, squishing me in a one-armed hug. He gestured towards my scooter, which I had parked alongside the driveway. "And that beautiful creature?"

"My new baby." I couldn't keep the smile out of my voice. "I know I could've walked but..."

"But why not."

"Exactly."

"You did it in a dress. I'm impressed. And your hair looks great."

It wasn't sarcasm. I felt wonderful.

Sarah was inside, already busy with party preparations. I imagined Jason must've been relieved at my arrival. Sarah was a bit of a stranger to him, and a bit strange in general.

The thought of the two of them hanging out together without me put an awkwardly amusing picture in my head. Sarah was, of course, very excited to see me. She grabbed my hands and started explaining everything that had been done or still had to be done before the rest of the guests arrived. Words streamed out of her mouth at pace and Jason and I simply nodded and smiled until the flow ebbed.

"Great," I said. "How can I help?"

While I was arranging the paper cups and snack bowls on a table, Sarah was climbing tentatively on Granny Pam's lounge suite so that she could reach all the dusty brass fixtures and drape streamers over them. We were short on time and nobody spoke. The loudest sound was the clack-clack-clack coming from the kitchen, where Jason was mixing up a mustard dip with a big plastic spoon. Granny Pam was in there with him, fussing over a cake I had begged her not to bother with. She had insisted. In her opinion, birthdays had to involve cake. Sarah hadn't got around to baking one (which I was relieved about) so Granny Pam had taken the responsibility upon herself. She was making me a vanilla sponge cake with caramel between the layers and a white icing. It smelled delicious, and my stomach was grumbling a little bit as I emptied packets of sweets into the snack bowls. My mother had given me a great variety of sugary crap to rot my friends' teeth: hard, chewy, chocolate, peppermint, liquorice...

The place was looking like it was set for a ten-year-old's birthday bash, with gelatine snakes and fizz pops all contributing to the effect. I almost laughed when Sarah brought out the balloons and I did laugh when I saw how red her face went every time she blew them up.

"Here, let me do that," I said, taking the packet from her. She looked relieved and sank back into the couch to catch her breath.

"I hate balloons," she said. "I mean I like them, but I hate blowing them up. And I hate it when they pop."

She was seated only for a few seconds before she bounced back onto her feet and started folding serviettes.

"So who all is coming?" she asked. "Anton and Melody, obviously. Is Lwando coming?"

"Maybe," I said. "I invited him. And my neighbour, Josh."

I felt my face burning a little when I realised how few people were going to be attending the event. It was going to be humiliating, and Melody would probably delight in my lack of friends. Sarah interpreted my blushing as being somehow related to my mention of Josh.

"Ooh, so who's this Josh?" she asked.

"Just my neighbour. Can't say I know him very well, but he's lived across the road from me since we were kids."

"Is he cute?"

I laughed, awkwardly. I hated those sorts of questions. If I said yes, she'd assume a whole bunch of things that weren't true and if I said no, I would be insulting Josh, who was, in fact, rather cute.

"He's coming to the party, so you can judge for yourself."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to steal him or anything," she said.

I choked on another laugh and was about to protest, when she said, "I have my eye on someone else."

My heart sank a little bit. It had to be Jason. He'd never go for Sarah, with her embarrassing honesty and her forwardness and the fact that she couldn't keep still or quiet for more than a minute at a time, but the thought of someone else obsessing over him was awful, and I knew that it would destroy any meaningful relationship I could've had with this pale, weird girl.

She hadn't given me any further information; she just stood there, humming and nodding and folding the serviettes and so, forcing a smile, I asked "Who is it?", hoping to get a confession out of her, even though I knew it would wound me terribly. She laughed a little bit through her nose and her cheeks darkened again.

"I'll tell you later, maybe. I don't want to jinx it."

I found myself feeling annoyed with Sarah. She was immature and silly. I didn't see the point in her bringing up the subject if she wasn't going to provide me with any details. I felt myself bristling a little bit, trying to think of ways to keep Jason away from her. I didn't want him to find out about her feelings and be flattered by them. He'd never fall in love with her, but maybe he'd enjoy the ego boost just enough to play along for a while. I wasn't obvious like her. I didn't tell people about my feelings or display them on my face. If he played along with Sarah, he wouldn't know he was hurting me, because he didn't know how

I felt about him. I was just Roni, his old friend, who lived up the road. Roni, as in *Veronica*, not *Ronald*, though it hardly made a difference. I might as well have been a guy. He certainly never treated me any differently because of my anatomy or because of the fact that I sometimes took time to dress myself up a bit and paint my face for him. Sarah wasn't a particularly beautiful person; her smile revealed a bit too much gum, her nose was weird and her hairline seemed too far back on her head, but there was still something about her. Her translucency and her almost creepy blue eyes were fascinating enough to distract one from her flaws. I caught myself wishing that she was fat or pimply.

Jason entered the room to put the dip onto the snack table next to the chips. He had transferred it into three colourful little bowls and topped each one with a sprinkle of chopped chives. I watched Sarah's face as Jason busied himself making space on the table, but she revealed nothing. I had been expecting her to blush, at the very least, after her little confession. She was better at hiding her feelings than I had anticipated.

Jason threw himself onto the couch, clearly exhausted by dip-making.

"Roni, we need some booze," he said. "I have a few coolers and Pam's gin crap, but it's not going to be enough."

"There aren't that many people..." I started, but he cut me off.

"It's not going to be enough. I'll go down to the bottle store and get some."

I went to use the bathroom, which was frilly and flowery and smelled strongly of floral air freshener. There was a fluffy mauve cover on the toilet seat and a matching rug and toilet roll cosy. Granny Pam had gone to great lengths to steer the focus away from the emptying of bowels and bladders. There were all sorts of kitsch little things cluttering up the place. The windowsill was heavily populated with porcelain ballerinas and fairies and the walls were a patchwork of framed, pressed flowers and old advertisements for soap which featured chubby, angelic, blonde children in copper bath tubs, frolicking in the foam. There were puppies in some of the pictures too, one of which looked remarkably like Patches. I peed, flushed and went back to the lounge only to learn, with great horror, that Jason had left for the bottle store and that Sarah had decided to go with him.

Granny Pam told me this very sweetly, as she placed the completed cake in the centre of the table. It had *Happy Birthday Veronica* written on it in coiled, sugary, silver lettering. Of course almost nobody called me "Veronica" but I wasn't about to point this out

to Granny Pam. She had put a great effort into the cake, even crafting a few fondant flowers which were arranged around the base.

"It's lovely, Pam," I said. "Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it."

"Oh, not at all, dear," she laughed. "Any excuse to bake. I just hope it tastes as good as it looks."

She bustled into the kitchen and I heard the grating sound of a can being opened with an old can opener followed by a strong whiff of cat food. The cats, which had all excused themselves from the lounge upon our arrival, sauntered back in and slipped into the kitchen, passing comments. The comments became slightly louder and sounded a little bit offended when Patches bounded in after them, having abandoned the safety of Granny Pam's bedroom. I sank into the couch and let my head flop back while my body went slack inside my party dress. Granny Pam opened the kitchen door to let the puppy out and a breeze washed through the lounge. The streamers above me floated on it like psychedelic mermaid hair. They made a light papery sound as they moved.

My stomach was churning with pre-party nerves. I wanted people to enjoy themselves. I wanted people to like me. I wondered if the dress was a bit much. Perhaps I should've worn jeans and a T-shirt. My legs weren't the best. They were always pale and looked a bit like the skin on a frozen chicken, even if I shaved and moisturised them. My ankles could've been thinner and my knees less knobbly. I thought the exposure of my legs might be ruining an otherwise pretty outfit. Or was it pretty at all?

My jewellery was simple, my make-up understated. I wasn't glowing or sparkling the way Melody-Raine always did. I thought about a nightmare I'd had more than once, in which I was late for the matric dance and I couldn't find anything and I hadn't styled my hair or plucked my eyebrows. I could see all the other girls filing into a stretch limo and I knew it was going to leave without me. I drifted off on the couch, and was brought back into consciousness by a sudden piercing coldness on the side of my face. Jason and Sarah were back and Sarah had pressed a dewy bottle of Champagne against my cheek.

"Wakey wakey," she said. I wanted to hit her.

"Right," said Jason, putting all his parcels down on the floor with a great clanking of glass. "We got Champagne, tequila, some beers, some vodka coolers, a few different sorts of shots, and Cape Velvet, because you like the milky shit, right, Roni?"

I did indeed. It was a lot of alcohol. Too much for the number of people attending. My nervous gut twisted painfully. Sarah started packing it all into the cooler box and emptying bags of ice around the bottles. Granny Pam shut the door in the kitchen with a dull thunk and the rippling streamers flopped down and resumed their motionless dangling. A helicopter passed over and imagined my house burning down while I wasn't there. Would they think to rescue my books?

Half an hour before the party was due to start, Granny Pam picked up her handbag and announced that she would be spending the evening with a friend, so that she wouldn't get in the way of the party. She also informed us that she was leaving Patches in her bedroom with her bed, food and water, and closing the door behind her so that she would stay there and not get under anyone's feet.

"Which friend?" Jason asked. "And why can't you take Patches with you if you're worried about her?"

"Just a friend," she said, adjusting an earring. "Mind your own business, Jason!"

Of course, this made him even more curious, and he followed her to the front door.

"A male friend?" he asked.

"It's not important! I don't need you getting ideas in your head."

"Are you going out?"

"Yes, we're going to a restaurant."

"Ah!" Jason clicked his fingers and pointed at her. "It's a date. Who is the lucky man?"

Granny Pam shook her head. "Good bye, my dears," she said, looking past Jason as if he wasn't there and smiling brightly at me and Sarah. "Have a wonderful time."

Jason followed her all the way out to the car, but returned without the information he had been after. He was followed in by Anton and Melody. They arrived early so that Anton could set up the sound system with all his expensive equipment. He seemed to be under the impression that he was some sort of professional.

As I had expected, Melody looked perfect. Her hair was beautifully messy; something I had never managed to achieve. Her dress was shorter than mine and it fit her perfectly. It was multi-coloured and very eye-catching, particularly around the chest. There was a lot of cleavage on display and a pretty silver locket nestled in it. She wore glittery pumps on her

feet and earrings that twinkled with tiny pink crystals. She had painted her nails to match, and her left arm jangled with an assortment of colourful bangles.

"Happy birthday, Roni," she said, drawing out each word as she hugged me with one arm. Her perfume smelled like jasmine and vanilla. She took a step back and looked me up and down.

"You look gorgeous!" she squealed, clearly ecstatic that she had outdone me on my own birthday party. There was more to it than that, however. Her eyes were twinkling in a way that suggested an even greater victory. I didn't have to wait long to find out what it was. She seized me by the hand and led me off down the dark corridor so that she could divulge the information that was just about causing her to levitate out of her pumps.

"Guess what?" she breathed. Minty fresh. Her teeth were pearls in the shadow.

"What?" I breathed back, trying my very best to sound excited.

"I asked Anton out. And he said yes."

Her face split into the widest smile I'd ever seen. She let out a high-pitched squeak and grabbed my shoulders, just hard enough for it to be painful. Her eyes drilled me for a reaction.

"Wow, that's... Yay!" I said. I even managed to sound convincing. "And when did this happen?"

"This morning," she said. "It's been developing since I moved back here. I just got tired of waiting for him to ask me, so I thought, you know what, it's the twenty-first century, I'll ask him first! And he said yes! He was probably trying to pluck up the courage for ages."

"That's fantastic, Melody, I'm so happy for you," I said. I didn't know why, but a coldness was spreading through me, starting somewhere in my chest and seeping steadily down. I felt the world speeding up again. Even if I ran outside and jumped onto my scooter, I knew I wouldn't be able to catch up with it. Melody stood there in front of me, happy and victorious. I hated her and I hated Anton and I hated myself for feeling like that about them. It was pathetic.

"Don't tell anyone," she said. "I don't want them all knowing about it just yet."

So I was the special friend, the only one in the know. But it wasn't a privilege to be trusted with the secret, and she knew it. Telling me the secret served two purposes. She got to tell someone and she got to hurt someone, at the same time. The same person: me. She

told me because she had covertly declared a war of one-upmanship on me and this victory only counted for anything if I was aware of it.

We made our way back to the lounge, where Anton was still fiddling with the sound system, a frustrated redness starting to glow in his face. It obviously wasn't working out quite as smoothly as he'd hoped and his expertise was on the brink of being called into question. Jason was standing next to him making suggestions, which didn't seem to be helping much. I took a seat on the couch next to Sarah, who had one of the cats on her lap. Melody had to sit on one of the armchairs because I had sat down in such a way that we couldn't squeeze a third person on there, despite the couch being big enough for it.

A few minutes passed without anybody saying anything. The atmosphere was uncomfortable and I was wondering if the entire party was going to be like that, but then the music started pumping out of Anton's speakers and the tension lifted.

"Yay! Good job!" said Melody, clapping her hands and beaming at Anton. His face went even more red than it already was.

There was a polite knock on the door which was only just audible over the music. Jason opened it and Josh stepped over the threshold, smiling awkwardly. He had very big teeth and big ears and a big nose but all the oversized features came together nicely and his face was strangely pleasant to look at. He was holding a gift in his hand. I had told everyone else not to buy me presents, but I must've forgotten to tell Josh. He was a little over-dressed for the occasion, with smart pants and polished shoes and a blazer that was slightly too small for him over a white collar shirt. At least he wasn't wearing a tie and the top few buttons of the shirt were undone. I felt sorry for him immediately. He'd been at school with Jason, Anton, Melody and me, but we had never been friends. He had spent all of his free time in the computer labs, playing first-person shooter games with the other geeks. I wondered if he had actually wanted to come to the party, or if he was doing it out of obligation. Or because his mother told him he had to.

"Hey, Roni, happy birthday," he said, handing me the gift. It was soft and badly wrapped. I could feel Sarah's eyes drilling into the side of my head and I wished that she could hear what I was thinking. *This is not my guy. Jason is my guy. You can't have Jason. You can't have him. You can't...*

Inside the scrumple of paper and Sellotape, there was a rather beautiful green scarf. It was made out of a fine, silky fabric with tassels on the ends and delicate patterns stitched

into it in metallic green thread. A surprising choice, for someone like Josh. I was very pleased and expressed this with a brief side-hug, and by putting the scarf around my neck immediately, even though it didn't match my dress. What did it matter, anyway? Melody already outshone me tenfold and there was nothing special about my neck that necessitated its exposure.

Lwando arrived and Sarah scooted up on the couch, pushing me along so that he could squeeze in next to her. Her face had lit up as he'd entered the room, and I watched all the blood rush into her translucent skin as he sat down, and suddenly it was all very obvious. I felt a curious mixture of relief and guilt flood through me. She wasn't interested in Jason at all. She never had been.

"So what are we drinking?" Lwando laughed, leaning over Sarah and poking me in the shoulder. Sarah grabbed him by the hand and dragged him over to the cooler box.

The sun was only just starting to set in the smoky sky outside when the drinks were passed around and the shot glasses came out and the place started its transformation from a house in the middle of suburbia to a bright ship out on the sea, far away from everything and everyone else. We closed the curtains against the unsettling glow of the fire on the mountain and the spinning lights of the fire engines parked up there, and we forgot about everything outside the room completely. Our twinkling ship set off into the great unknown.

Being drunk wasn't something I was accustomed to, but that night it felt right. I slipped into it like a foot into a sock. I was so mellow that when I answered a knock at the door and found my sister standing there, I wasn't angry or surprised. I even invited her in. It was only when three strange people pushed their way in after her that my brain gave off any warning signals.

"Vicky, who are..."

"I'm sorry, Roni," she said. "I told them about the party and they said we should go check it out. Aubs insisted."

Aubs. I snapped my head around to look at the three invaders, who were sauntering down the hallway towards the lounge. I blinked a few times to clear the fog. Aubs the lanky boy, Julie the lumpy girl and another shady character with a beanie pulled low over his head and a shelf of greasy hair jutting out over his eyes.

"Aubs?" I asked.

Vicky gestured towards him, thinking I didn't know which one he was.

"What kind of a name is Aubs?"

"It's short for Aubrey," said Vicky. "He hates that name."

Aubs. I stared at the twitchy boy, wondering what he was doing at my party. I hadn't liked the look of him when I'd watched him slouching and smoking outside my house, or when I'd seen him at the mall, and I didn't like the look of him now, either.

"Hey, Aubrey!" I called out. "This is not your party!"

"Roni!" Vicky hissed. "I told you he hates that name."

Aubrey had turned around to look at me. He had his eyebrows raised and his pierced lip curled up in a sneer.

"Oh, so you're the ugly sister," he said. "It's your party, is it? Don't mind me, I'm no trouble, honest."

There was a threatening sort of sarcasm in his voice. I looked back at Vicky, who was a little bit red in the face.

"Vicky, get them out of here, please," I said.

Aubrey was still watching us and Vicky's face reddened even more.

"Chill the fuck out, Roni," she said. "It's a party."

Before I knew it, all four of them were in the lounge and the rest of the guests were greeting them awkwardly and throwing confused glances in my direction. The atmosphere had become suddenly bristly. Jason sidled up to me and nudged me with his elbow.

"Did you invite these people?" he asked quietly.

"Of course not," I said. "Vicky brought them here."

"Did you invite Vicky?"

"Why the hell would I invite Vicky?"

Vicky must've heard me say this because I caught her glaring at me, her face dark. Then she moved swiftly towards the cooler box and helped herself to some tequila, straight out of the bottle.

"Great party, Roni!" she said. "Are these like... *all of your friends?*"

Aubrey and the lumpy girl sniggered. Beanie-boy was busy helping himself to some snacks at the table. The song that had been playing ended and in the moment before the next track started, I was aware of the stifling silence in the room. Melody, Anton, Lwando, Sarah and Josh were all rooted to their seats, and everyone seemed to be avoiding eye

contact with everyone else. The intruders had completely shattered the vibe. They all looked shifty and unpredictable, Vicky included, and I wouldn't have been surprised if one of the boys had whipped out a flick knife and demanded money. Jason cleared his throat.

"I don't mean to be rude, but you lot weren't invited to this party," he said. "I'd appreciate it if you could... you know... *leave*."

"And who are you, curly?" Aubrey said, taking a beer out of the cooler box and twisting the top off with his bare hands. He cocked his head to one side and looked at Jason.

"Listen, dude, this is my grandmother's house. I don't want any trouble, I just want you out."

Aubrey laughed. It was one of those forced laughs, acidic, without a hint of amusement.

"*Dude*? Hah. We're not hurting anybody. And what are you going to do?"

"Whatever I have to do," said Jason. I was surprised at his confidence. "In case you hadn't noticed, there are four guys here and even if you get your lady-friends to fight for you, you're still outnumbered. So maybe you should leave before things get ugly."

Aubrey laughed again, but he didn't sound so sure of himself anymore.

"Jesus, Vicky, your sister has seriously fucking lame friends."

Lwando got to his feet and started rolling up his shirt sleeves. Sarah looked completely horrified and shrank into the couch.

"Lwando..." she whispered, tugging a pocket on his jeans as if this would get him to sit down again.

Then Anton was standing up, and Josh reluctantly did the same. Unlike the other two, Josh's face was pale and his eyes darted around nervously. He was a champion orc-slayer and had fought valiantly in many great virtual wars, but I doubted he'd ever raised a hand to a real human being.

"Come, Aubs, let's get out of here," Vicky said. "Julie, Greg, come..."

But Aubrey wasn't quite finished.

"You're pussies," he said. "You don't have it in you. And your party sucks. You're gonna miss us when we leave."

"And when will that be?" Jason said, cool as anything. "Because I'm getting bored of you."

"Shut up, you fat coloured fuck," Aubrey spat.

Jason didn't seem particularly bothered by this, but Lwando launched himself over the back of the couch, charged towards the boy and floored him with a single punch to the face. Aubrey crashed to the ground, taking a chair with him and spilling beer all over himself and the carpet. Blood started pouring out of his nose.

"Oh my God!" Sarah screamed. "Oh my God!"

Lumpy Julie and Beanie-boy were clearly not interested in any further involvement and headed straight for the front door, disappearing into the night as quickly as they could. Vicky backed away against a wall. Her eyes were wide and her mouth was hanging open. For a moment, everyone was frozen, waiting for Lwando to move back in and throw another punch, but he stepped back and flexed his fingers.

"You can leave now," he said.

Aubrey scrambled to his feet and headed out, grabbing his leaking nose with one hand and Vicky's arm with the other. He practically dragged her out after him. Jason closed the door behind them.

"Holy shit, Lwando, you work at a craft shop?"

Anton started laughing and a few others joined in and the tension eased a little bit.

"Roni, I had no idea your sister was so crazy," said Melody. She looked shocked and even a bit impressed. I couldn't tell if she was impressed with Vicky for being crazy or impressed with me for living with her. "I think you need to tell your parents about the people she's hanging out with."

The barb of judgement, ever-present, as if she knew better, despite the fact that she was an only child. She wanted to remind me that I had responsibilities; that if Vicky had been her sister, she would've done something about that sort of behaviour.

When the buzz started to wear off a little bit and the room was spinning without it being an enjoyable sensation, I looked around and I didn't like much of what I saw. Anton and Melody were on one of the armchairs: Melody on Anton's lap, her head resting on his shoulder. His lips were moving. He was whispering something to her. I noticed his arm around her waist, his hand resting on her bare thigh. She was laughing at whatever he was saying to her. He must've been able to feel her breath against his neck and he must've liked it. Sarah, Lwando and Josh were on the couch, Lwando in the middle with one of his arms draped over Sarah's shoulders. She had fallen asleep while he and Josh were having an

intense discussion about something. Josh was using his hands a lot as he spoke, moving them around for emphasis. One of them was clutching a plastic cup full of Jack Daniels and Coke and he kept sloshing it onto his shirt without realising what he was doing. Jason was nowhere to be seen. It occurred to me that I'd last seen him heading down the passage and assumed that he had been en route to the toilet, but then I considered that perhaps he had gone to check up on Patches in Granny Pam's bedroom. I slipped out of the lounge and stumbled down the passage, which felt narrower than it normally did. I made contact with the walls a few times.

As I had suspected, the bathroom was unoccupied but Granny Pam's bedroom door was ajar. Light was spilling out in the passage. I nudged the door open and saw Jason sitting on the bed with his back to me. He was holding Patches in his arms. The dog saw me first over Jason's shoulder, her tail-wagging causing her whole body to move, and Jason turned around to see what she was reacting to. I got a fright when I saw his face. It was tear-streaked and puffy and red around the eyes and it felt even more when he saw me standing there.

"Roni," he said. "Leave me alone. I just want to be alone."

My heart had quickened, pumping the drunkenness back into my head. Everything was warping and bending and fuzzy around the edges. I took a step, a lurch, towards Jason, nearly lost my balance, regained it by throwing my hand out against a wardrobe. An unpleasant warmth pulsed in my wrist. I must've hit the wardrobe hard.

"Jason, what's wrong?" I asked, taking another, more tentative step towards him.

"Seriously, Roni, *not now*."

He sounded angry. My mind was all over the place, racing and scrambling to understand what was going on and somehow, out of all the chaos, I came to the conclusion that Jason was lonely and that, like me, he was jealous of all the couples forming around him, possibly including his own grandmother, who was off wining-and-dining with a strange gentleman. He felt left out, rejected, unlovable. He needed somebody. He needed me.

Up until that point, loving Jason was just a state of being. There was no plan. I had this sunny daydream about us together in the future, but I had never done anything to make it happen. Up until then, I hid my feelings so they were never reciprocated. They were also never rejected. It was self-defence. In my head, our togetherness was something that would simply fall into place at the right time. But when was the right time?

I crossed the room with a few more shaky steps and planted myself next to him on the frilly bedcover. He turned his head away from me. I could see he was still crying from the teardrops on his chin. One clung on for a while and then dropped onto his shirt, leaving a wet spot amongst many others. I leaned closer to him and Patches licked my face. The puppy was in the way of what I wanted and needed to do, so I gently took her out of Jason's hands and set her on the floor beside my feet.

"Jason, talk to me," I said, barely aware of what I was saying. There was a hurricane in my brain and the sound of it was drowning everything out. I forgot about the party and the guests and the fire and everything except for Jason, who, for the first time since I'd been in love with him, was more vulnerable than me. Then, from the depths of my memory, someone else surfaced. Of all the people I could've thought of in that moment, it was Karen, with a stupid smile on her face. *Everybody could see you had a thing for him... You should've just told him how you felt...*

"Roni," Jason said. He was going to say something else, but something was pulling me towards him. It was like falling down, like gravity dragging me off a cliff. I turned his face towards mine and pressed my lips against his and there was a split second that felt like an hour in which my life turned around and I was completely happy with everything...

Then, with unexpected force, Jason pushed me away from him. He was looking at me with absolute horror. Everything was blurry except for his face.

"Roni!" he gasped. The tone and volume of his voice was like a sharp backhand across the mouth. I was frozen in shock. I could feel my heart beating in my throat and in my eyes.

"Jason, I..."

"For fuck's sake, why do you have to make it worse?"

"Make what...?"

"Just leave me alone!" he bellowed.

I stood up and stumbled backwards over the puppy, who yelped and scampered out of the bedroom through the open door. I wondered for a moment if anyone had heard Jason shouting at me, but the music was too loud. People would've come to investigate if they'd heard anything. I wanted to run back to all of them, to get sympathy, to go back in time. I would've even taken it from Melody. But I couldn't move. I looked back at Jason and realised I was crying when I couldn't see him properly. He was liquid.

"I don't understand," I said. "I just don't understand."

I brushed the tears out of my eyes and looked at him, trying hard to focus with the room heaving all around me. He looked up at me and he didn't look angry any more, just sad.

"Roni, I'm gay," he said.

There would be no flowers, no wedding cake, no bright-eyed, curly-haired children running around my front garden. Perhaps I wouldn't even have a front garden. Perhaps I'd be renting out a granny flat in the corner of my parents' property, growing old and bitter all on my own. I was feeling so many things at the same time that I found myself incapable of saying anything for several, long minutes.

"Why were you crying?" I asked, and the question sounded lame.

"Because," he said, wiping his face and sniffing a little. "Because I've liked somebody for a long time. You know... *like* liked. And even though I knew it was never going to happen, it still hurt to be proven right."

"Anton?"

He nodded.

I couldn't help laughing. "But Jason, he's so obviously..."

"I know, Roni," he said. There was a trace of laughter in his voice, too. "Like I said, I knew it would never happen. It's just... sad. You know?"

"Yes, I really do know..."

His face puckered up with concern for me then. He stood up and took two swift steps across the space between us and drew me into a hug like no other hug I'd ever had before. His heart was beating against my cheek and I bawled into his chest, the sobs grating my insides against my ribcage. It felt horrible but at the same time there was a weight lifting off of me, pouring out of me through my eyes and my nose, clawing its way noisily out of my throat.

"I'm sorry I shouted at you, Roni," he said. "That's no way to treat a best friend."

A car pulled up outside. The headlights lit up the curtains and I wondered if Vicky had returned with an army. It didn't occur to me that it might be Granny Pam, returning a little earlier than expected from her mysterious dinner. I followed Jason out to greet the new arrivals and was surprised to see that it wasn't Granny Pam's car, and it wasn't Vicky,

either. It was none other than Carl, in his old Ford. I was very confused as he stepped out, unable to fathom why he had showed up at my birthday party. The few strands of grey hair he had left on his head were slicked to one side, and his usual fuzzy, brown attire had been replaced with reasonably smart trousers and an old dinner jacket. I didn't recall mentioning to him that it was my birthday, and even if I had, it wasn't customary for elderly shop owners to attend the parties of their young employees. It took at least a minute for me to notice the other figure in the car, slumped in the passenger seat and sinking almost out of view. It was Granny Pam.

"Ah, Veronica," said Carl, sounding as surprised to see me as I was to see him. "Is this your party? Pamela mentioned..."

"Is she all right?" Jason asked, stepping forward to peer through the grubby car window at his grandmother.

"She's perfectly all right, son," said Carl. "I think she simply overestimated her capacity for wine-drinking. I thought it best that I drive her home. We can sort out getting her car back here in the morning."

Granny Pam lifted her head and peered out at us. Slowly, and with great effort, she sat up straight, opened the car door and stepped out into the night.

"I'm terribly sorry, Carl," she said. "It was a fantastic... I had a time. Very much."

She wobbled a little bit and Jason took her arm. Carl smiled, all his wrinkles rearranging themselves around his eyes and mouth.

"My dear, it was a pleasure," he said, taking her hand and giving it a kiss. Jason shot me a look out of the corner of his eye. He was holding back a laugh, I could tell.

"Veronica, enjoy the rest of your celebrations! Happy birthday!"

He folded himself back into the Ford and then he was gone, chugging away down the drive and leaving the three of us standing there on the grass, watching him until his tail lights disappeared around the bend.

"Marvellous man," said Granny Pam. She was leaning heavily on Jason and had a moony look on her face.

"How did you meet him?" I asked her.

"I went to the shop the other day," she said, carefully forming each word in an attempt to disguise her slurring. "I needed some bits and bobs to make Christmas cards, you see. Jason told me you work there, but you weren't in at the time. They'd sent you out to

lunch, I think. Sarah assisted me. Very convincing young lady, Sarah. And then Carl came in and we got chatting and he took me out for lunch, right away."

"That's lovely," said Jason, steering her carefully into the house. I followed, feeling strange and light and disconnected from everything. The alcohol wasn't fogging everything up anymore, but things weren't clear, either. It was like wafting through a tunnel with marshmallow walls. My feet didn't seem to connect with the ground very solidly. I wanted to go home and sleep, but the party wasn't over yet and it was my party.

The guests seemed a little alarmed at the sight of Granny Pam. Jason guided her out of sight and put her to bed as quickly as he could, but the damage was done. The music volume was turned down and the chatter became subdued. There was an elderly woman in the house and, even though Granny Pam had been completely knocked out by wine and probably could've slept through a natural disaster, everyone felt obliged to be quiet. I hadn't been aware of all the sound for some length of time. It was like the drone of a vacuum cleaner or an air-conditioning unit that you become accustomed to and then marvel at the crisp silence when it stops. The party noise left a void when it was gone and people started twiddling their thumbs, quite literally, in Anton's case.

I leaned against the wall near the table and felt exhaustion wash over me. Had the party been a success? I had no idea. Bits of it were still beyond belief or comprehension. I needed to sleep on it. Perhaps I'd wake up in the morning and find some sort of mental clarity. I scanned the room with heavy eyes. Sarah was asleep. Lwando was flicking through the photos on his digital camera and Josh was leaning over to see them. I hadn't noticed the camera until then and wondered what horrors had been captured on there without my knowledge. Melody yawned theatrically, slipped away from Anton and glided off to the bathroom to powder her nose. She couldn't possibly have a bladder to empty or anything like that.

"I guess we'll be off soon," said Anton. "Hope you've had a good one, Roni."

"Yes, thank you," I said, and was surprised to find that I meant it. I felt like I had been through a blender, but it was a good sort of pain; the sort you get after a long hike. An itchy scab scratched off. A boil, ruptured. The pressure was gone. The clotting and healing had commenced. I always had preferred sharp, sudden pains to throbbing aches that lingered.

Jason came in from the kitchen and stood next to me. He had Patches curled up in his arms.

"Where was she?" I asked. "I forgot she ran out..."

"She got right into the cupboard where the food is. Didn't manage to get the bag open though."

I tickled the dog's head. "Can I help with the cleaning tomorrow? I'm dead tired..."

"It's your birthday," he said. "You don't need to clean up at all. I'll handle it."

The end of the party was a blur of people leaving with the drone of birthday wishes and a valiant effort on my part to sound appreciative of each and every predictable sound bite through the haze of tipsiness and fatigue. There were side-hugs and handshakes and a selection of forced and genuine smiles, and then it was just me and Jason and Patches and the crickets chirping and creaking in the bushes outside. It didn't seem like a good idea for me to ride my scooter home, so I left it in Jason's backyard and he walked with me.

The streets were lit up with the fiery orange glow that I was growing accustomed to, and all was quiet apart from the distant whoosh of cars, the chirping of night bugs and the occasional barking of dogs from behind dark walls and fences. Our shoes crunched in the gravel.

"So..." I said. "How long have you known?"

Jason laughed. It was a shy laugh, slightly uncomfortable.

"I've always known," he said. "I just didn't admit it until recently."

"What changed?"

"Pam got it out of me."

"Granny Pam knows?"

"Yep. Just you and Granny Pam. She interrogated me a while ago. Asked me why I didn't get a girlfriend, why I spent so much time on the internet, if I'm depressed or lonely. She worries about me, you know."

"She's great."

"She really is." There was a smile in his voice. "I decided to be honest with her. She's the only family I have and she's done everything for me. I felt like I owed it to her to be honest. And she took it well. She was surprised, of course, but she's not your typical Fish Hoek granny..."

"Are you... are you going to... come out?"

He laughed at my awkwardness.

"Yes," he said. "I'm just... getting it sorted out in my head. At least I've got telling you out of the way."

"You took about five minutes too long to tell me," I said, and instantly regretted saying it.

Jason was quiet for a few moments. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry, too."

"You won't go and tell anybody..."

"Of course not! I'm your best friend. It's your job to tell people and my job to punch them in the face if they react inappropriately."

He turned to me and grinned. "Thanks, Roni. I might need that. We do live in Fish Hoek..."

"Ah, fuck those people," I said. "They don't matter."

"How do you think Anton will take it?" I was surprised that Jason would mention Anton after his confession in the bedroom.

"Well, that depends if you tell him that you were in love with him or not," I said, forcing a chuckle and trying to make light of the whole thing.

"I don't think I'll tell him that," said Jason, quite seriously, as if he had actually considered it. "I think it would make him uncomfortable."

I didn't doubt that. "Have you always had a thing for Anton?" I asked. "And why Anton?"

Jason laughed. "On and off, for a long time. Sometimes he drives me crazy, and then I get over him, you know. I guess it's just because he's always been there, in my face."

I could sense Jason blushing after that sentence – imagining me, imagining him, imagining Anton with his sculpted chest and his stylishly tousled hair and his smouldering Italian eyes.

"I hope this stops feeling weird, soon," he said. "I'm really glad you're ok with it."

Of course it wasn't easy for me, having my romantic hopes and dreams completely destroyed by this new information, but I was trying very hard to keep myself together and I seemed to be succeeding.

With everything else that had been going on, I had almost completely forgotten about the fire, but I was soon reminded of it. As we made our way up the hill towards the glow, I felt a heaviness inside me. Something wasn't right.

"It's much closer, isn't it? I can see actual flames. They were keeping it back earlier. It's jumped..."

"Jesus," said Jason. "I reckon you should start packing. Your parents have probably started already without you."

"Why didn't they call me?"

"It's your birthday, Roni. They probably didn't want to ruin it."

"Maybe it will be ok, right? I mean, the fire engines..."

"Just pack your stuff. The wind is changing. I can feel the heat and everything."

We paused and we stared and the flames stroked the sky.

University of Cape Town

Day Six. Friday. Things happen.

Josh Bergstein handed me a tin cup of hot chocolate. Even in the heat, it was exactly what I needed. My hands were shaking and my mind scrambled. The creamy liquid soothed the twitchy maniac inside me that was threatening to burst out at any moment, screaming and bawling and beating bare fists on the gravel.

"Thanks, Josh," I said. "I should be the one giving you the hot chocolate. I mean, your house is on fire..."

He laughed. It was a nice laugh. "Nah," he said, pouring another cup for my mother. "We got most of the important stuff out. We had warning. It'll be fine."

So calm. So mature. The flames were only just starting to lick at our house from the surrounding trees and bushes, and I was already in a state. I felt nauseous and I was struggling to keep my voice even. It kept coming out of my mouth as a strained whine, on a higher pitch than normal. Our house was being defended by an army of firemen and bucket-wielding volunteers. For the moment, it was unscathed, but I was already falling apart while Josh, whose house was well fucked, was calmly dishing out chocolate relief to his shellshocked neighbours. I'd always dismissed him as a geek, and I felt bad about that as I watched him carefully pouring the hot water out of the flask, stirring in the powder, adding unnecessary sugar, sharing out the milk.

We'd parked all the cars down a side road, out of the way of the fire engines, and were camping out. With our bags and our trunks and our televisions in the backseats, we were refugees of our own little natural disaster. It struck me how many of the people who were there with us, our neighbours, had always been little more than vaguely familiar faces

and easily forgotten names. For years we'd all just waved politely from a distance and tried not to get in the way of each other. We kept to our own little boxes behind our own little fences and kept the peace through a strategy of total avoidance. It wasn't the sort of neighbourhood where people borrowed cups of sugar from each other. The only time anyone ever interacted was to complain about barking dogs or noisy swimming pool filters, or to seek permission for renovations or the installation of higher fences. It had taken an inferno to get the real introductions underway.

It was the first time I'd ever met or spoken to the Padayachees, the Derrins, the Nkweles and the Jorgensens, all of whom lived on our street and had done so for quite some time. Indeed the Jorgensen family claimed to have been there almost as long as we had, and yet I only half recognised the couple and hadn't been at all aware of their child or of Mr. Jorgensen's mother who apparently lived in a granny flat on their property. I had always known that we lived next door to an elderly couple, the Pretorius', but what I didn't know until then was that they had a granddaughter named Karen, who had just moved back to Fish Hoek with her husband and her baby, Chastity.

"Perhaps you know her, Veronica," said Mrs Pretorius. "You're around her age."

"Oh yes, I know Karen," I said, putting a great deal of effort into my tone of voice. I wanted to make it sound like we were friends without having to actually say it and therefore lie. "We were at school together. I saw her just the other day, with the baby."

My mother was sitting with them and I was relieved when they started talking about something else. I didn't want to think about people my age who were married with children and I didn't want my mother to think about it, either. At my age, she had already given birth to me, she had married my father, she had a job, she lived in a nice little house and she had purchased her own car. I tried telling myself that things were different in those days. People grew up faster. Times had changed. But it didn't make me feel much better. I couldn't escape that the fact that I was a sponge. No degree, no respectable job. At least I had the scooter.

Vicky was sitting in the open back of the bakkie with her legs dangling out. She was crying. After all her snarky enthusiasm about the house burning down, she was surprisingly upset now that it was a very real possibility. The cat-carrier was next to her and through its bars came Guts' voice, clear and serious, protesting his confinement. He'd been much

younger and smaller when we had bought the carrier and he'd outgrown it, but there hadn't been time to sort out an alternative. The last time I'd seen him behind bars was the day we took him home from the SPCA. When the firemen knocked – an urgent knock – we had little time to pack and I'd squashed Guts into the cage before he could get away and hide in the garden, which he generally did whenever chaos threatened to complicate his lazy enjoyment of life. Luckily, my father had been packing for days already. My mother's optimism hadn't deterred him. "Rather safe than sorry," he'd said, whenever his actions were questioned.

"Veronica?"

I'd spaced out. Josh was standing in front of me, holding a bag of marshmallows.

"Marshmallow?" he said. He was smiling. In contrast to his semi-formal attire of the night before, he was wearing baggy jeans, a blue hoodie and a comfortable-looking pair of old takkies. It suited him much better.

"Thanks," I said. "Could never say no to a marshmallow."

I dropped the marshmallow into my drink and watched it melt. Jason had spent most of the day with us, helping us lug our belongings to safety and trying his best to distract me from the fact that my childhood home was in danger of burning to the ground. His actions, while appreciated, were ever so slightly too intense, as if he was trying to make up for yelling at me and breaking my heart at my birthday party. There was a lot we still needed to say to each other, but we couldn't find an appropriate moment to do it. Both of us were stuck in an act, pretending nothing had changed. It was easier that way, but also uncomfortable. It was a relief when he decided to take a break from his best-friend duties and go home to check up on Granny Pam, who was nursing a terrible hangover and apparently feeling very sorry for herself, after what she thought was a perfect date ruined by her inability to refuse another glass of wine from a gentleman.

When Jason had left, Josh moved in to fill the space. He kept us all company, chatting and laughing and dishing out marshmallows, but he was definitely hanging around me the most. I guess he figured we were friends now that he had been invited to one of my birthday parties. The green scarf he'd given me was folded up in my handbag. It really was a lovely gift. I wanted to tell him again in case I hadn't expressed it strongly enough the night before, but I couldn't seem to find a place for that in the conversation, either. Nothing

seemed like an appropriate topic unless it was fire related. You can't talk to someone about a scarf when their house is burning down.

At around two o'clock, Anton arrived. I hadn't expected to see him. He parked his car down the road, out of the way, and walked up to us. Melody wasn't with him.

"Hey, Roni, how are you guys?" he asked and gave me a hug. He'd given me friendly hugs before, but that didn't stop it from feeling weird. He wasn't huggable like Jason.

"We're ok thanks," I said, and then felt bad for speaking on behalf of Josh, whose house was burning down. "Well, I'm ok. Josh..."

"My house is on fire, but I'm ok," Josh laughed.

"Oh, shit," said Anton. "I heard there were a couple of properties burning, but I didn't realise one was yours. Sorry, dude."

He gave Josh a manly but awkward pat on the shoulder. They didn't really know each other and I wasn't in the right state of mind to perform my duties as the link between them. The three of us stood there in silence looking up at the smoke and the flames. It looked a bit like a volcano.

"Is your place going to be ok?"

"I hope so," I said. "They've got a lot of fire fighters up there. Lots of people volunteering too. My dad's there, and Josh's dad."

"My mom's not happy about it," said Josh. "My dad's an accountant and a stamp collector..."

Josh's mom, who was larger than his father in height and width and who appeared much better suited to fire fighting than he did, had been fretting and pacing around the camp for most of the day. The contraction of her brow had created a wrinkle right up the middle of her forehead and she had fiddled most of the curls out of her hair.

We sat down on the curb and surveyed the chaos. Mrs. Pretorius had brought out a framed photograph of something sentimental and she was gazing at it with dewy eyes as if the end of the world was moments away. We heard the sound of fire engines in the distance and I had to remind myself that we weren't the only burning neighbourhood in the valley. A deadly wind had scattered embers all over the place and the poor fire fighters were rushing backwards and forwards trying to keep everything under control at the same time. They had even brought in reinforcements from other areas.

"Where's Melody?" I asked Anton, trying my best to sound casual about it.

"Oh, she's out with some other friends," he said. "I think they're visiting from overseas."

"Ah."

I felt bitter. How was it that Melody had "other friends" and I didn't? She was a bitch. A bitch with a boyfriend and a larger social circle than mine... I looked up towards the fire with unfocussed eyes and considered the idea that I might actually be the bitch, and Melody a model of niceness and perfection. No. She wasn't. She wasn't a nice person at all. But I was jealous of her for succeeding in spite of that, when I seemed to be floundering around, a failure, my niceness weighing me down like an anvil strapped to my leg. Perhaps I wasn't nice either and I could recognise her bitchiness because it was the same as mine. Perhaps we didn't get along because we were too similar. I dismissed this notion after remembering the way she ate her chips at the Brass Bell. If we were similar in any way, I was doing a good job of hiding it. Or she was.

I looked at Anton and wondered why I was feeling so bitter. I didn't want him. I wouldn't have had him if he had begged me. It was a matter of loyalty. Long ago, we'd been united in our dislike of Melody-Raine but now he was dating her, blind to all her wickedness. We could never be close friends again. Had we ever been close friends? He was looking at the ground where his foot was rubbing the loose tar. He appeared to be lost in thought; perhaps thoughts of Melody or the fire or the party. As I looked at him, I thought about his heart beating and the blood beneath his skin and his lungs expanding and contracting. 'We are all sacks of meat,' I thought. 'And none of us are roasting on that fire right now.'

"It's good to have you two here," I said. It just burst out of my mouth, unexpectedly.

"Likewise," said Josh, and smiled at me.

Anton put a hand on my shoulder and wiggled it. "It's all going to be ok," he said.

"Even if your house burns down."

I laughed. He was probably right.

And then a lot of things happened. My mother was putting out a few extra camping chairs to accommodate the Venters from down the road.

"Vicky!" she called out. "Throw me a few cushions from the bakkie, would you?"

Vicky, a snivelling mess, reached behind her for the cushions and lobbed them towards my mother one by one. The last cushion was caught under a trunk. I watched Vicky

tugging it from her sitting position for a few seconds before frustration got her to her feet and she assaulted it with both hands, one foot up against the car. When it came free, it did so quickly and with a ripping sound, and Vicky toppled slightly, swinging the cushion as she tried to keep her balance. The cushion connected Guts' carrier cage with force, knocking it right off the bakkie flap and onto the gravel, where it bounced once, the bounce coinciding with a horrified yowl from Guts, and then landed, upside down, the catch popping open and releasing eight kilograms of highly volatile ginger cat into the camp.

"Fuck!" Vicky shouted, drawing the attention of every person present who wasn't already looking at her. Guts had hit the ground running, quite literally. For such a portly cat, he moved astonishingly fast; he was a streak of orange rocketing across the tar, right up the road towards the house.

"No!" Vicky dropped the cushion and dashed after him "Guts!" she screamed.
"Guuuuuuts!"

My mother's face was frozen in shock. "Roni, you have to stop her!" she yelled. "The fire is out of control up there! She's going to do something stupid!"

I put down my hot chocolate and started to run after my sister. Anton was already running, ten paces ahead of me, charging forward powerfully. I could hear Vicky's screaming ahead of us. She was sounding increasingly crazy, her voice cracking and screeching as she became more and more desperate. My lack of fitness started to catch up with me as I lurched after Anton. The distance between us grew rapidly. I felt a stitch in my side, my heart hammering against my eardrums, throat burning, legs aching. Vicky and Anton had both disappeared with the curve of the road. The smoke was dark and thick. I could hear the fire, spitting and crackling and roaring as it consumed Josh's house and the one next to it. The light of the late morning sky was completely blotted out. It was as if the darkest night had fallen over our street. I pulled my shirt up to cover my mouth with it but I was too late to stop the coughing fit which started clawing its way out of my throat.

"Vicky!" I called out, in between coughs. My voice was scratchy and all but inaudible.
"Anton!"

When I eventually reached the heart of the action, lights and voices struggling through the blackness, I was coughing so hard I had to lean against a fire engine to avoid falling over while I tried to catch my breath. One of the volunteer fire fighters handed me his hip flask and I took a deep gulp, undeterred by the fact that it tasted like pure brandy, and

gave it back to him with a nod and thumbs-up by way of a thank-you before stumbling forward into the chaos.

"Ma'am!" said a stern voice. "Ma'am, you have to get back!"

At first, I didn't realise this was directed at me, being unaccustomed to the title. Then a gloved hand seized my arm and proceeded to drag me back the way I had come. I recognised the owner of the hand as the short, authoritative fireman I'd watched from my bedroom window.

"My sister!" I choked. "She ran up here. And my friend! Where are they? I need to find them!"

"Just stay back!" he bellowed, far louder than was necessary. He looked haggard, and his face was streaked with soot. I thought I might cry and it must've showed on my face because he seemed to take pity on me and offered me what information he had on the situation: "They ran into this property from the driveway there." He gestured towards my house. "There's a lot of flames in the vegetation. The fire fighters there will chase them back out. Just stay back."

I nodded, fighting back another coughing fit and went around the nearest fire engine to get a better look at my house. Most of the trees and bushes were either smouldering or fully ablaze. There were firemen manning the hoses and volunteers armed with shovels and palm fronds and old blankets and all sorts of random things, trying to beat the flames into submission. There were more fire fighters around our house than around Josh's, which was burning wildly and with a lot of noise. They had already lost that battle and were working desperately to avoid losing another one. Vicky was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Anton.

My throat was burning and my eyes stinging and I felt a few tears threatening to spill over. I looked back at my house, the image rippling behind the heat. It didn't look like my house anymore. It didn't feel like my house, in the same way that a familiar place feels strange in a dream. We had moved a lot of our stuff to safety, but there was also a lot left behind; the bigger things, like the beds and the desks and tables, were still in there, crouched and terrified and waiting for the fire to consume them. There were other things too that were either too difficult to pack or easily replaceable or simply not important enough to bother with, like most of the crockery, a lot of the food, some of the linen and all of the magazines. The frantic packing process had forced us all to decide which of our things

were cared about most. As I stared at the house, I imagined all the ugly shoes and holey socks and unravelling jerseys and pants with broken zippers, lurking in the cupboards, abandoned and doomed. We had prioritised the packing of irreplaceable things with sentimental value like photographs, expensive things like jewellery and computer equipment, and important paperwork, which my father had kept in box files in the ceiling.

Just then, something caught my eye; it was lying in the curb, glinting green and blue in the sunlight. I went over to it and picked it up. It was the bead I'd absent-mindedly shoplifted from Carl's earlier in the week. It must've got caught up in all the frantic packing and dropped as everything was moved out of the house. I held it in my hand. The glass was hot against my palm and I could feel that it had a small chip in it that hadn't been there before. I wiped it off on my shirt and pressed it into my pocket.

"Roni!" A voice carried through the commotion. At first I thought it was Anton, but then I saw my father lumbering towards me. He was soaked in sweat and filthy, with a paper mask over his mouth. "Roni, what are you doing here?"

The tears started to spill over then and I ran over to him and pressed my face into his filthy shoulder. "I can't find Vicky," I sobbed. "Guts got out and ran up here and she ran after him. Anton was running after her. I can't find either of them. The fireman said he saw them running into the garden from the driveway."

"Oh, Jesus," he said. "But it's on fire. Surely they wouldn't..."

"I don't know! Do you think they could've got past the firemen?"

"Jesus," he turned around and glared at the driveway, as if he expected to see them coming up out of the smoke. And then he was gone, charging towards the flaming garden and leaving me there, my heart cold and solid in my chest. A couple of the volunteers called after him as he ran. "Len! What you doing! Len! Come back!" Mr Bergstein abandoned the burning bush he was beating and went after him. "Leonard!" I heard him yell as they both became obscured by trees. "Leonard, wait!"

Everything was disappearing into the inferno: my house, my sister, my father, my neighbour's father, my friend, my cat... vanishing in plumes of smoke. The smoke was everywhere, it was everything, it was rising above me and moving around me and tearing through me. I was coughing again, so violently that I thought I could taste blood in my mouth. My eyes were streaming and I pressed the palms of my hands against them. When I took them away, I saw two people stumbling out of the haze, one supporting the other,

struggling across the battlefield towards safety. It was Vicky and Anton, Vicky looking a little worse for wear; not injured, it seemed, but rather going through some sort of emotional collapse. She was crying so hard that her face looked like a tenderised steak and she seemed to have lost the ability to walk properly. I ran over to them and linked her free arm over my shoulder.

"It's crazy in there," said Anton. He sounded a little shaken. "Fire everywhere. She ran right into the garden after the cat. Of course it got away. I had drag her out, she didn't want to leave..."

"I'm right here!" Vicky wailed. "Don't talk about me like I'm not here!"

We started leading her back down the road towards our little refugee camp, but she was having none of it. "I don't want to go back there! Mom's going to go all psycho and scream at me and everyone will be looking at us!"

She had a point. Anton and I exchanged glances behind her head. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"Jason's place?" I suggested. "You can take her there, I'll run down to my mom quickly and tell her what's going on. Or else she will go psycho anyway."

She did go a bit psycho, wringing her hands together and chewing on her lip, but she wasn't noisy about it. With a note of melancholy in her voice, she told me to look after my sister, as if she was reluctantly passing something of hers on to me. "Len and Guts, are they ok?" she asked.

In all the chaos, I had forgotten about my father and Josh's father running into the fire. But they were dads. Dads were invincible.

"I'm sure dad will be ok," I said. "Guts is probably hiding under someone's car somewhere. He'll come back." I wasn't convinced about that, but I had to be positive.

Josh was standing around in the background, watching us. Even without looking at him directly, I could tell he wanted to come over and find out what was going on, but he was keeping his distance so that he didn't seem pushy or nosy. I was briefly overcome by an urge to march over to him and hug him, but I resisted it and simply smiled at him before leaving the camp.

I caught up with Anton and Vicky on the way there. Vicky wasn't in a rush to be cornered and fussed over by anyone. She was dragging her feet with her head hanging down, sooty hair falling over her face. We walked in silence, me looking straight ahead and

Anton twisting his head around to get a good look at the fire from a distance. Out of respect for us he didn't comment, but I'm sure he wanted to. I knew the sight was spectacular without looking at it. The glow was everywhere and I could feel it on my skin.

We reached Jason's place. Anton knocked. Jason opened the door and his eyes went wide.

"Jesus, are you guys ok?"

"Granny Pam asleep?" I asked him.

"Yes, she..."

"Can I be alone with Vicky for a bit? Anton will explain everything."

"Sure, you can go through to my room. But are you guys ok?"

I nodded. Vicky reluctantly took her arm away from Anton's shoulders and followed me into Jason's room. It had always been such a beautiful room, every surface littered with arts and crafts, the walls cluttered with Jason's paintings. He had painted all of the wooden furniture in bright colours and patterns. There was a lot of junk lying around too, but it all just blended in with the artiness. Despite her emotional state, Vicky still commented on it.

"Jeez, what an awesome place," she said.

I wanted to agree with her, but then it would take us away from what needed to be said. I pulled out a colourful chair for her and perched myself on the end of Jason's bed.

"Vicky, what's going on?" I asked her. "You have to tell me."

She knew she had to tell me. She sat down and looked into her lap, where her fingers began twining together painfully. I sat and I waited and I stared at her until it started to feel there was no else outside of that room. The fire had consumed everyone else. We were the only ones left. Just us two. We'd have to start over, alone, together. After imagining this for a while, I felt happy that Vicky was there, sitting next to me, alive.

"Vicky..."

She looked up at me. And then, with a face of snot and tears, she told me the worst story I had ever heard.

"It was last week and I was sitting at home alone. Dad was working, mom was shopping, you were out with Andrew or Jason or something and I got a call from Aubs. He sounded really scared, like something bad had happened. He said he was in his secret place and he needed me to get there as soon as I could because he needed help."

"Secret place?"

"It's up in the hills across the fire break. He goes there to do his drugs and be alone. So I went and he was standing there. I could see he had been doing tik – "

"You hang around with tikheads?" I realised the tone of my voice wasn't helping the situation, but I couldn't stop myself from sounding disgusted.

"No," she sobbed. "I don't hang out with Aubs when I can help it, but he follows me around a lot. He's a fuck-up. You don't understand. Just listen. I walked up and he was standing there. The look on his face... I can't even explain. I knew it was serious. He led me back a bit further into the bushes and – " she choked up and pressed her fingers into her eyes. "And..."

"And what? Did Aubrey do something to you? Did he rape you?"

"No!" she looked up, shocked. Apparently I was way off the mark. "No, he didn't do anything to me. I went with him and there was a body. It was a kid's body. He killed a kid, Roni."

"Oh my God."

"The kid followed him to the secret place and freaked him out or something. He got a fright and pushed him, and the kid hit his head on a rock and he was dead."

"Kyle Nunes."

"Yeah, it was Kyle Nunes. He's dead, Roni, and his parents are still looking for him."

"And they haven't looked up there yet because of the..." I went even colder inside than I already was. "Vicky, did you set the fire?"

A violent sob tore itself out of her chest and she buried her face in her hands.

"Vicky, talk to me."

She looked up again. Her face was puffy and streaked. "I was freaking out, too. I picked up all his drug stuff. I said we had to hide the evidence. I had his lighter in my hand. I didn't even think about it properly, I just... I started the fire, right there next to the little kid. Like if I burned it, it would all just go away. Aubs was yelling at me because he said the flames would lead people right to the body, and I realised he was right and I felt so stupid and scared. But then the wind just caught the flames and it was spreading so fast I couldn't believe it. We ran back. Nobody saw us."

I didn't know what to say. She was shaking a lot, as if there were small electric shocks running through her body. I felt like I was floating out of the back of my own head,

everything was tipping over, sliding out from underneath me. It was like falling out of a hammock. A few minutes passed.

"Vicky, I don't understand," I said. "Why didn't you tell anyone? Why did you go to him in the first place? Why did you help him? You said you don't even hang out with him..."

"I don't," she said. "Well, I do, but I don't want to. He's horrible, Roni, he gets in your head. I freaked out when I saw the kid lying there. I was scared."

"Scared of what? Of who?"

"I don't know, everything. Aubs, the police, everybody."

She sucked in her lips and looked at the ground. I could feel my heart limping painfully in my chest. I felt nauseous. She looked back up at me, her face ashen and said:

"It's my fault Johan Botha died."

"What do you mean?" I said. My voice wasn't my voice. It was muffled, breathless. "He died in a car accident. You didn't kill him."

"But it's my fault," she said. "We were at a party. I was drunk. I wanted him to notice me but he never did. Not in *that* way, anyway. I was upset and Aubs gave me some acid and tried to take advantage of me, but I didn't let him. I went up to Johan instead and basically threw myself at him. I was out of my mind. Johan was telling me to stop, trying to push me away."

She wiped her eyes and turned her face away in shame. "Eventually he couldn't take it anymore and he left the party. He said he was 'Over it', and he just left. And then he crashed his car and he died. It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't made him leave. He was going to stay over."

"That's not your fault, Vicky," I said. "It's just bad luck. It's not your fault he died."

"I'm scared that Aubs will tell mom and dad and about the drugs. I don't do them anymore, not even weed, I promise. Please don't tell them." Her voice rose hysterically.

"I won't tell them. But you have to promise me you'll never speak to Aubrey again."

She took in a deep, shuddering breath and then released it all at once. Her face looked dead. She wasn't crying anymore. She nodded. Her breathing evened out and her eyes had glazed over. She was all used-up.

"I miss him," she said. "I miss Johan."

I felt like someone was tightening a piece of ribbon around my throat. One of the wide, silky ribbons you could purchase by the meter at Carl's. Tighter and tighter, cutting off

my mind. I put my arms around my sister for the first time in years. Up, up, up, far away, there are planets and stars and space and we are nothing and nothing matters. *Nothing matters.*

The next thing that mattered was the phone call I received from my mother. She was frantic, her voice like glass shattering. There had been an accident; the branch of a burning dead tree had fallen onto somebody in our garden. Len, my heroic father, had moved the branch and pulled the victim to safety, and in the process had suffered burns to his arms and face. Cape Medical Response had rushed them both off to the local hospital. My mother was already on her way there.

"Is he going to be ok?"

"Yes, he's going to be ok, he's going to be fine, I don't know how bad the burns are, oh, my God..."

"Mom, calm down..."

We grabbed our things and headed out. At the front door, I noticed that the old hat that was always on the hat stand, the one that had belonged to Granny Pam's deceased husband, was no longer there. I wondered if its disappearance had something to do with Carl. The thought occupied my head for only a moment, before I switched back to thinking about Vicky and my father. We all bundled into Jason's car, Anton in front, Vicky and me in the back. Her face was a terrifying shade of grey, her eyes rimmed with red. She looked at me and opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. I knew what she wanted to say, though, and I shook my head.

"It's not your fault," I mouthed. "It's going to be ok."

She hung her head and looked at her knees. Her fringe was a collection of greasy, sooty strings dangling over her forehead. Her lips were pale and cracked.

"Seatbelt, Vicky," said Jason, starting up the car.

She clipped herself in.

The hospital was dark, worn and depressing. It had a chemical stink mixed with the smells of sickness and misery. There were zombies milling around the foyer and others sitting on benches, waiting to be helped. An old man was wheezing and a woman was holding a cloth against the bleeding head of a little boy. She had a baby fastened to her back

with a towel and the baby was wailing. The sound made the hairs on my arms stand up. I looked away.

It was a challenge to get the information we wanted out of the staff, but eventually we were directed down a series of dingy corridors, one of which had a sad-looking wheelchair abandoned in it. It made me want to cry. As we neared the ward, I saw Josh standing against a wall, typing something on his phone.

"Josh?"

He looked up at us and smiled.

"Your dad's in there," he said, gesturing towards the doorway. "They've moved my dad to another hospital."

"Your dad?" I was confused for a moment, before I put the pieces together. "It was your dad?"

"Oh," he said, realising our ignorance. "Yeah. He's going to be ok, thanks to Len."

I didn't even think about it, really. I just marched over to Josh and hugged him. A good, proper hug, with a squeeze at the end. He looked a bit embarrassed afterwards. I didn't turn around to see how the others had reacted. I just took a deep breath and walked into the ward. They all followed me in.

My father was lying in the nearest bed looking battered. His hands were wrapped up in white bandages and there were sticky-looking bits of gauze on his face and neck. It made me think of a cartoon character that had just cut its face shaving with an oversized razor blade. He waved one of the wrapped hands at us.

"I've been in the wars!" he said. "No big deal though. Not as bad as poor old Bergstein." He looked at Josh. "Your dad's tough, though, Joshua. Small, but tough."

Josh smiled and nodded.

My mother had leapt out of her bedside seat as we entered the room and now she rushed over to us.

"He's fine, see? He's fine. Nothing to worry about."

She looked completely frazzled but there was a smile on her face. She hugged me and Vicky together and then burst into tears.

"It's ok, mom," said Vicky, patting her on the back.

"I know, I know," said my mother, stepping away and wiping at her eyes. She put her shoulders back, sniffed and composed herself, a slight blush staining her cheeks as she cast her eyes over Josh, Jason and Anton lurking near the doorway.

"Vicky, you scared the living daylights out of me," said my father. "I thought..."

"I'm sorry, dad," said Vicky. "I'm really, really sorry."

She looked delicate and ready to leak, but somehow she managed to keep herself together. I thought perhaps she was all cried out. There were no more tears left in her to spill.

"Anton found me. Anton helped me out," she looked over at me. "And Roni helped me, too."

"Brave lot we have here," my father smiled at me and then at Anton. "Thank you."

Anton blushed. "Anyone would've done the same." He looked at Vicky and the blush spread across her cheeks, too. She looked at the ground.

"Do you think Guts will be ok?" she asked. The question wasn't directed at anyone in particular. "It's my fault he got out. It's all my fault..."

"Vicky, don't be silly, he'll be back tomorrow," said my mother. "Things happen."

Silence fell for several long moments in which everyone avoided eye contact with everyone else and a bird outside the window screeched over his car park kingdom.

"We'll head off now and let you guys have some privacy," said Jason. "Glad to see you're ok, Mr. Franken."

"Thank you, Jason," he said "And thanks for bringing the girls."

There was a chorus of farewells and three guys headed out, Anton turning to share a brotherly smile with Vicky and me before he turned away.

"Could I maybe get a lift?" Josh asked as they stepped out of the ward. Jason responded with "Sure!" in his jolliest voice. I wondered if they'd end up being good friends. I hoped so, because I wanted an excuse to see more of Josh.

The shadows were growing long outside. The day was golden. A rectangle of light slid into the ward, warm against the white. After the chaos of our neighbourhood burning, the quiet at the hospital was profound. Each hushed word and echoing footstep, every rustle of the papery blankets against my father's restless legs, soothed me. I knew this was the eye of the storm. There was a whole lot of damage and truth and consequences to get through in the hours and days and weeks to follow. Vicky, Aubs and I were the only ones who knew

that Kyle Nunes was dead. Each time I made eye contact with Vicky, the horrible facts were lit up in my mind, and undoubtedly in hers too. She would look away from me quickly, as if my gaze burned her. We would wait until we got home. We would get our mother to sit down on the couch. And then we'd tell her. The Nunes' would be informed. And the police. Aubrey would have to face the consequences, and Vicky would too. I wanted to hide Vicky away, stash her in a basement somewhere so that nobody could find her and hurt her and make her unhappy. She looked so broken and vulnerable, all her teenage cuteness erased. I wondered how she had managed to keep herself together for so many days, forcing the horror into a dark corner of her brain where it could slowly eat her away. She was dealing with it now, and that, at least, was good. The septic flesh removed, the beginning of cauterisation. She would always have scars and holes and pieces missing, but I had hope for her. I had heard stories about the durability of babies; that they survived earthquakes and landslides and other natural disasters. I remembered hearing about a baby that had been sucked out of a house by a tornado and recovered, unharmed, in a tree some distance away. I hoped that Vicky still had enough youthful squishiness to get her through. Young bones heal better. Maybe young minds do too.

Day Seven. Saturday. Helmet.

The sound of my scooter was noisy but wholesome. I was riding away from our street while people were flocking there to look at the damage. I was tired of looking at it. Every time I caught sight of Josh's shell of a house, I felt miserable and sick. We had moved back into our house. The garden was burnt-out and the walls had been licked black, but it was spared otherwise. My mother was keeping all the windows and doors shut even though it was hot, because every time the air moved, it brought ash with it. The post-fire stink irritated my nostrils and put an unpleasant taste in my mouth.

The neighbourhood was broken. So many familiar things burnt, destroyed, dead... We had survived, and we'd been more fortunate than some, but that didn't mean we were unchanged. Everything had changed. There were things that had happened before the fire and there were things that would happen after it. What would those things be?

I looped round and round the neighbourhood, stopping on each street to dismount my scooter and peer under a car or behind a bush. I had brought along a little tub of cat pellets, which I opened up and shook around each time. I kept expecting Guts to waddle out into the open with something to say for himself, but he didn't. He was nowhere to be seen. I had brought along a few MISSING CAT posters and I stuck them to lampposts and fences with tape. They featured a fine picture of Guts, sitting tall and wide on the back of an armchair with his face like a muffin. He didn't look vulnerable at all. I wondered if anyone would take pity or take notice at all. I had included the words "well loved" in the description.

There were still a few pictures of Kyle Nunes here and there, faded and smudged; some hanging at sad angles. I removed a few of them and placed them face-down on the ground. The truth was out and the posters would only hurt his parents more. I was keeping away from the truth and its consequences. I'd had enough of all that. I didn't want to be involved any further. I didn't want to think about it. That was up to the Nunes family and Vicky and Aubrey and all the parents and the law. My helmet was on, and I imagined it blocking out everything I didn't want in my head. It was a shield, the lightning bolts and bullets of tragedy ricocheting off of it and spinning away into nothingness. I needed to be alone and I needed to be occupied. All I could do was look for my cat and wait for the storm to pass.

After a while, I stopped getting off the scooter. I just rode slower and slower, occasionally calling out Guts' name. It was such a heavy feeling, so frustrating and depressing. I was willing to do just about anything to find my cat, but I couldn't think of anything else that I could do. I thought about the Nunes family for a moment and how much worse it must've been for them, with their child missing for the entire festive season. And now he was dead, his little body burnt away, nothing left to bury but charred fragments. The horrible image of the flames, rising, crackling, licking over him until his flesh started to cook, made me feel sick. I swerved my scooter off to the side of the road, tumbled from the seat onto the grass and vomited into a flowerbed. The heaving ripped at my insides and didn't stop even after there was nothing else inside me to throw up. It felt like something was tearing in my stomach. I curled up on the grass and cried, which hurt even more. It was a horrible cry; the retching, shuddering, uncontrollable sort that leaves you feeling utterly depleted afterwards. I couldn't indulge in this for long because I didn't want anyone to drive past me, see me lying there and feel compelled to stop and investigate. I got to my feet, brushed myself off, wiped my mouth with a ragged tissue from the pocket of my pants and climbed, jelly-legged, back onto my scooter.

I wobbled onwards, feeling weak and clammy, barely paying attention to my surroundings. If Guts had crossed the road in front of me at that point, I wouldn't have even noticed him. It was only after I hit a small pothole and nearly came off the scooter that I snapped my brain back on and started looking around. And there was something to see. It was ahead of me in the oncoming lane. A stone on the tar. Perhaps an inflated packet. A car passed over it. As I got nearer, I noticed that it was moving; not in the wind, but of its own

accord. It was a tortoise, trying to cross the hot tar and reach the safety of the pavement on the other side. Another car was approaching and I panicked. I flapped my right hand in the air and with my left hand, steered my scooter into their path.

They slowed down and came to a stop in front of me. The unpleasant-looking gentleman behind the wheel threw his hands up into the air. His windows were rolled down and I heard him say, "What the fuck?" I pointed at the tortoise. He shook his head, but the anger dissipated. He reversed a little way back, and then drove around me and the tortoise. He was still shaking his head.

I moved my scooter to the side of the road and picked up the tortoise. Its shell, like my helmet, was hot to the touch. I turned it in my hands and looked at its face. It was a thoughtful face, which the creature pulled back into its shell at the sight of me. The knobbly legs continued to move, hoping to touch the ground again, but I didn't put it back on the ground. Instead, I opened up the luggage box on my scooter and carefully placed the creature into it. I rode home carefully, taking the corners as slowly as I could. Once or twice I heard the tortoise bump into the side of the box, but only gently.

En route, I decided it was a male tortoise and named him Helmet. I don't know why I took him home. It occurred to me as I pulled my scooter into the driveway that there was no vegetation for him to eat in our fire-ravaged garden.

I opened up the luggage box and removed the tortoise. He had pulled all of his limbs into his shell. Carrying him carefully with both hands, I crunched my way into the garden. It was my first time in there since it had been on fire. My father had advised me to stay out of there in case more branches fell, but I went in anyway. It was unbelievable: the smells, the colours, the textures. The ground was the surface of a strange planet and the trees were dark reptiles with charcoal scales. Clusters of dense, green shrubbery had been reduced to brittle talons, clawing their way out of the ground. There were a few spots that appeared to be smouldering and I kicked at them in terror even though there was nothing left to burn. The absence of life in the garden was absolute. I spotted charred snail shells, crispy lizards, a snake like a stick of droëwors, the blackened bones of a rodent.

I went all the way in, right to the back where our garden and the garden of the next house merged across an old chicken-wire fence. Nobody ever came in this far. Before the fire it had been too overgrown to get near. The fence separating us from the neighbours on that side had hardly been necessary. I stood there, thinking about fences and how the only

purpose this one served was to keep our pets from wandering into another family's property. And then I noticed a hole in the fence, on the ground just to my left. Something had dug its way under the fence and bent the chicken-wire slightly.

"Guts?" I called out. My voice had no echo. In fact, it felt like it had less than no echo. The sound seemed to vanish before I was even finished making it; muffled and dead like the ashy wasteland I was standing in. "Guts?"

There was no response. If he had burnt to death, I would find his remains in the garden. I wasn't going to bother looking though, because my instinct told me that he had escaped. I didn't need the hole in the fence to convince myself. It simply reaffirmed what I already believed. Guts wasn't a stupid cat.

The garden on the other side of the chicken wire fence was only partially burnt. The owners of that property had stood on their balcony with hosepipes and fended off the fire. I felt something against my hand. Helmet had emerged from his shell again and was starting to move his legs. I went down on my knees and slipped him through the hole in the fence. He went back into his shell as I put him down, and I took the opportunity to push him along the ground with a burnt stick, closer to the greenery in front of him.

"Have a nice life, little guy."

I made my way back to the house, taking my own helmet off as I went.

Late that afternoon, dark clouds began congregating in the valley skies. They brought with them an electric tingle that drew me over to my bedroom window. I dragged a chair with me as I intended on staying there until the inevitable storm happened. I didn't have to wait long. First, and a day late, swathes of thick rain swept over everything. It came down harder and harder until it wasn't falling with the rhythm that rain usually had. It didn't breathe, it didn't ripple or surge, it just blasted down as a pillar of angry water; like the hose of a tardy fireman, overcompensating. It didn't peter out but rather stopped abruptly, leaving a hissing silence in its wake before the first crack of lightning ripped across the darkness and the thunder shuddered, breaking the tension and splitting the sky open again. The rain mixed with the loose ashy ground on the slopes and it all washed down, turning the road into a muddy mess.

Josh's empty house looked forlorn as the water poured in through its wounds. He and his parents had moved in with relatives in Kommetjie until things got sorted out. They

had insurance and support and they would be fine. I was looking forward to his return, but I had a feeling that we weren't going to stay. It didn't seem right, after everything that had happened. Nobody had said anything to that effect, but I could sense it. Something had shifted. It was like getting up from being in a comfortable position and then being unable to find that position again upon returning. I could reorganise my arms and legs as much as I liked, but it didn't help. Everything was at awkward angles and pressing painfully into soft flesh. If we didn't move, we'd be slowly bruised until we liquefied. My mother had made no effort to unpack any of the boxes, like she normally would've done. She'd spent all day dealing with Vicky.

My scooter had been parked in the car port before the storm had started. It was safe. I'd brought the helmet with me upstairs. As the lightning and thunder intensified, I got up from my seat at the window and picked the helmet up. I sat back down and pushed it onto my head.

I watched the storm, with the helmet on my head, and the occasional tears burning salty tracks down my face. The sound of it was comforting, blocking out all other sounds. It was just me and the storm. I was weathering it in my little bedroom, a shack on a tiny island in the middle of the ocean. I was a castaway, cut off from the rest of human kind, until my phone beeped. A message in a bottle, washed up on the shore. It was from Jason.

Hey Roni. When the storm clears, I'm picking you up to walk the dogs. :)

And the storm did clear. The rain became a gentle hush and then petered out altogether. The clouds broke up and cool evening light fell through the gaps. The wind died down to a strong breeze with intermittent gusts that rattled through the wet trees, sprinkling rain droplets from their leaves. Some trees were scorched and leafless, and the wind just hissed around their blackened braches. Jason's car pulled up outside, even though I hadn't responded to his message. I went out, careful to avoid everyone in my house, leaving a note at the front door.

"Hey," said Jason as I climbed into his car.

"Hey," I said, and smiled at him.

We didn't say much to each other on the drive. Faiza had obviously been informed of our non-routine dog-walking plans, because she was waiting at the gates with the dogs already leashed up and slobbering.

"Strange time to be walking dogs!" she said, as we approached.

"They don't seem to think so," said Jason, nodding his head towards the dogs.

Faiza laughed. "Always a good time for them. They'll appreciate it, thanks. What put this bee in your bonnet, Jason? Never seen you on a Saturday before."

"We needed to get out," he said, taking the dog leashes from her and handing some of them over to me. Bag was among them, as usual.

"Fair enough. How's Patches?"

"Patches is adorable and my grandmother loves her to bits."

"Of course she does. Glad to hear it. The rest of them all found homes too."

"Glad to hear that!" said Jason.

"Of course more come in all the time. You think you've found a home for all of them, and then three more show up on the doorstep. It never ends. But that's life, I suppose."

But life does end, I thought. Everything does. Even the fire, bringing destruction and chaos for a short, terrifying, wonderful moment and then over forever. All you can hope is that those faces around you, those faces you care about most when everything is lit up by flames, endure a bit a little longer to see you through the chaos. In a way all of us are strays, looking for a home, looking to be loved.

We headed off towards the beach, breathing in the smells of suburbia after the rain. It wasn't a beautiful smell, but it was a clean one, a pleasant one, like a dog after a bath or an old car after a hosing. The streets and houses seemed to be sighing in damp relief. The sky was dramatic: mottled and layered with clouds of varying shades and heaviness, blue grey sky visible in patches behind it and light leaking through onto the shimmering world below. The dogs pulled at their leashes, invigorated by the freshness, driven by the promise of wet sand.

The beach was chilly and blustery. The sand was cold between my toes. We let the dogs off their leashes to run and stood in silence, watching them. Jason turned to look at me, but I kept staring straight ahead. I knew if I looked back at him, I would burst into tears, and I didn't know why.

"Roni, you okay?"

I nodded. I knew it was unconvincing.

"Roni..."

I turned to look at him and felt my face beginning to crumple, as I knew it would. He gathered me up in his arms. My face was squashed against his shoulder, leaking hot tears onto his shirt. He smelled like washing powder and fresh bread.

"Life's really horrible to people sometimes," I said.

"It is," he said. "But sometimes it's all right."

We stood like that for a while, the wind chopping around us and flapping my shirt against my skin. The cold air gave me goose bumps and I shivered.

"This is a bit weird," I laughed, pulling away from him.

"Sorry," he said. "I just... I hope you're all right."

"I am now."

Bag came charging across the sand towards us with a crab-shell in his mouth, and placed it beside my foot. I patted him on the head.

"Good Bag!"

Jason laughed. "Seriously, when are you going to adopt him?"

"I don't know," I said, looking at Bag. He was looking back at me, with his sandy tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. "But maybe I will."

We walked to the wreck again and found it less exposed than normal. The sand had shifted to cover more of the metal skeleton. Only the tips of the ribs were poking out and sand was stacked high against the side of the boiler. A shaft of sunlight had pierced through the clouds, giving the area a golden glow. The bits of the wreck were warm to the touch. While the dogs scampered around, digging and pissing on things, we leaned against the boiler and looked out at the sea. There were patches of sunlight twinkling on the dark water. It was beautiful.

Four Months Later.

We go through all these places and these people and these things that happen and we take it all very seriously and then we die. It's amazing, really. While Vicky is painting her nails, each one a different colour, and cursing when she gets the polish on her fingers, someone, somewhere is winning the lottery or having a baby or finding out that they have an incurable disease or having their entire village destroyed by a mudslide or a flash flood. The court case is coming up and Vicky will probably go to juvie for a while. She's having counselling at the moment and she's trying hard to seem all right. I don't think she wants to cause any more damage, and if she acts up, that's exactly what she'll do. Our parents are stressed enough with everything that's happened, so Vicky's playing along, smiling more, acting brave, trying to keep herself in check. I can see the guilt and the pain on her face though, when she thinks nobody is looking. She gets a hollowness in her eyes and she pulls her lips together in a way that makes her look strained. Sometimes she closes her eyes for long moments, as if she's fighting back something horrible in her head. I've heard her slip out of her bedroom at night, more than once, and I've followed her. She goes downstairs and out through the porch door; the only one that doesn't squeak. I've seen her creep out into the garden and stand there, just breathing. Once, she cried a little bit; another time she stood looking up at the clouds that were floating in front of the moon. I watch her from behind curtains and I peep around corners. I know that she's suffering and I want her to be ok. I want to protect her. Aubrey has gone off to rehabilitation. They're cleaning him up before they deal with him. I hope he suffers for what he did to Kyle Nunes. And for what he did to Vicky. Vicky will never have anything to do with him ever again. I'll make sure of that.

I'm sitting on the porch and staring at the sky. Late afternoon, with the clouds just beginning to colour; a bit of peachy pink and a bit of gold. There's a breeze rustling through the trees and sighing through the ashy ground. It has a cold edge to it. Autumn is coming.

Bag is lying at my feet, tongue out. I convinced my mother to let me adopt him after Guts had been gone for several weeks. She had felt sorry for me, and thought that a pet would help to get everyone's minds off the horrible things. When I brought Bag home and introduced him to the family, they were all a little taken aback by his ugliness. My mother looked disgusted. But he grew on everyone in no time, the same way he grew on me. I think about Guts and wonder where he is and what he'll do when the rains come. It's been four months since the inferno chased him away. My father says it's best to move on and forget about the cat. He's most likely been run over somewhere. I like to think he ran up into the hills and decided to live free. I don't believe it, but I like to think it anyway. It's what Granny Pam believes about Puffy, the cat Jason buried in our garden. When the fire lilies came up, there was one right on the spot where he buried Puffy. I wanted to tell Granny Pam about it, but she still thinks Puffy is out there somewhere. Maybe Guts is out there somewhere too. Or maybe he's buried, his ginger fluff perished away, his feline bulk nourishing his own little patch of the world. Maybe fire lilies sprouted out of him, too.

The boxes are already stacking up in the dining room and the whole place stinks of marker pens from my mother writing on all of them; 'Kitchen', 'Bathroom', 'Stuff to store', 'Stuff to chuck out'. Grandpa Phil and Nabila have come down to visit and to help us move. They're getting married. Nabila couldn't wait to show everyone the ring as she walked in the door. She had flapped her hand around and her face had suggested that she was holding back some very high-pitched squeals. My mother's face had dropped momentarily upon hearing the news, but she'd quickly hitched it up into position, showing as many teeth as she could in an attempt to distract everyone from the horror in her eyes. Now, the smell of spices wafts on the air as Nabila cooks the supper with the few bits of kitchen equipment that have been left out of the boxes. This morning, after the announcement, my mother had accepted Nabila's cooking proposal with that same crumbly smile on her face. She's never been fond of spicy food, preferring all things stodgy and simple, but her desire to be gracious always overrides everything else. She continues to pack and stack boxes in the dining room, and the two of them exchange small talk over the sounds of their activities. It's slightly forced, but my mother is attempting to sound natural and amiable. Now that

Nabila's engaged to Grandpa Phil, my mother has to accept the relationship or give herself deeper frown lines and stomach ulcers over it. She's probably realised this over the last few hours. There is the ripping sound of box-tape being pulled off the reel and the scattering of dust-bunnies as long-sedentary furniture is moved around...

I don't feel sad. I don't feel happy, either. I just feel like things are moving along and I'm moving along with them. I've clipped myself into this machinery, this factory line, and I've relaxed into letting it put me together and take me where it will.

It's not a completely passive process. I filled in an application to the University of Cape Town and maybe things will go in that direction and maybe I'll stick with it and come out the other end with something to show for it this time.

I also told Josh that I'd like to see more of him. He was quite taken aback by it, but I think he was pleased. I told Vicky about that and she didn't make fun of me. We tell each other things these days. I wouldn't say we're friends now, but we're ok. I'm being supportive without being patronising and I guess she appreciates it. I'm starting to feel like an older sister now; someone she can look up to. It feels good. We're moving for her; far enough for a fresh start but not so far that we can't hang on to what we want to keep.

In the lounge, I hear my father telling Grandpa Phil the story of his heroic fire rescue. It's a story he's told countless times over the past few months. He adds and omits different details with each telling, but the climax is always the same.

"So I'm looking for Vicky and the fire is everywhere. I could feel myself cooking in there and choking. Bergstein followed me in. Great guy, Bergstein, but he's scrawny, you know. He follows me in, and I'm calling Vicky and then Bergstein starts calling, too, and we start to think she's not in there, you know, because it just doesn't make any sense. We can't see a thing. We turn back and then there's this crack and I hear Bergstein yelling. It was one of those massive blue gums, lots of big, dead branches, and one of the branches just comes off, BAM, and it's burning and Bergstein is lying there with this massive thing pinning him down. Jesus, he would've been a goner if I wasn't there, I'm telling you, dad. I just took it, you know, hauled it off him with both arms. There was too much going on for me to feel much. I dragged him out of there, old Bergstein, and only when they put us both in the ambulance, then I started feeling the pain properly. My God, there's nothing worse than a burn, hey."

There's a knock at the door and Jason enters without waiting for someone to let him in. He has Patches in his arms and I get an enthusiastic face-lick from the dog by way of a greeting. Bag bounds over to them and slobbers all over Jason.

"It's going to be so weird not having you up the road anymore," Jason says, looking around at all the boxes and tickling Bag on the head with his free arm.

"You going to miss me?"

"No, because we're still going to hang out all the time. It's not like you're moving to South America or something."

I smile. He places Patches on the ground and she darts out into the garden to hunt things in the bushes. Bag follows her. Many of the bushes have grown new leaves, but the blackened twigs are still visible in amongst the foliage. We sit on the porch and watch the dogs.

Grandpa Phil isn't the only old person I know who's recently become engaged. Granny Pam and Carl have decided to tie the knot, too. Jason was worried that it was all happening a bit fast, but I know Carl and it feels like a good thing.

"They're old," I had said to Jason after he told me the news. "No point waiting if it's what they want." The hat never reappeared on Granny Pam's hat stand. She had put it to rest in a wardrobe somewhere, probably in a lovely box with some tissue paper and something to keep it smelling good, but out of sight. She's helping out at the craft shop these days and the place is much better organised than before. Carl is thrilled. With her helping out so much, there's no need for Carl to employ so many people until next Christmas. Lwando has decided to look for another job and pursue some of his big dreams. Carl doesn't really want to let him go, but he understands. And I'm sure Lwando will be showing his face around there from time to time, anyway, because Sarah is still doing shifts when her timetable allows it. I'm sticking around until I find out if I'll be studying or not. If I am, I'll work on weekends. If I'm not, well, I'll figure something out. But things are going to change.

I'm thinking about the world and about everything: big thoughts, like my mind is this giant, pulsating creeper plant, sending out runners, curling through the soil and through the sky, trying to touch everything and wind itself around everything. Trying to absorb everything. I can't seem to reign it in. My fingers fiddle with my necklace. I made it myself. It's a chipped blue and green glass bead on a thin wax cord.

Change is the weirdest thing for me because suddenly everything becomes meaningful. Earlier today, I ran my fingers over the oily marks on my bedroom wall from the Prestick that used to hold up my map of the world. It was there so long that the paint that was underneath it is slightly darker, slightly cleaner than the paint around it. A rectangular void with an oily spot in each corner; evidence that I was there. Fingerprints on the window panes, scuff marks on the kitchen floor, the crusty wax stain on the carpet from an unwatched candle melting over, years and years ago. When we first moved into the house, I found a few girly stickers inside the door of my built-in closet; a fairy and a butterfly and a ladybug on a daisy. I remember scratching them off and getting my mother to clean away the sticky marks with a strong detergent. It was my room and I didn't want someone else's memories lurking in it. I scrubbed that girl out as best I could and the room became mine.

Perhaps the next inhabitant would paint over my Prestick marks, change the carpet. Perhaps the room would be a study and nobody would dream in there or wake up looking at the notches in the wooden ceiling and seeing the notches look back at them with a hundred faces. Perhaps there would be another fire and the house wouldn't be saved again and all the notch-faces on the ceiling would turn to ash and the paint would peel off the walls and the carpet would burn away completely.

"What are you thinking about?" Jason asks.

"Everything," I say. "Change is weird. Don't you think?"

He nods.

"Everything is weird, actually," he says, and I know exactly what he means.

He laughs and in a silly voice he says, "Veronica, what is the meaning of life?"

Vicky steps out onto the porch just then, and says, "Chocolate. Of course. What an idiotic question."

Jason laughs again. "Can't you see we're having a profound conversation over here?"

"Yes," says Vicky, waving her fingers around to dry her nail polish. "I'm here to offer my wisdom."

She leans against the wooden porch railing and sighs.

"I'm going to miss this place," she says. And then "Jason, your dog's found something."

Patches is tensed up next to a cluster of bushes, heckles raised, head low, growling slightly. She lets out a bark and moves around the bush, trying to get a better look at something behind the leaves.

"Patches!" Jason calls and the dog gives another bark before trotting back to her owner a little reluctantly. Bag, who had been snuffling around under another bush, follows Patches back and sits down at my feet.

Vicky swings her legs over the edge of the porch and slips under the railing. She crunches her way through the undergrowth and goes over to the bushes, holding her hands high to avoid smudging her nails.

"Careful, it could be a snake," I say.

Vicky crouches down carefully and peeks through the burnt twigs and the new leaves.

"Oh my God," she says. "Oh my God."

And then she's in the bushes, tearing at them and messing up her nails and soiling her jeans in the ashy ground and when she emerges, she's holding a ginger cat in her arms and she has tears all over her face. Guts looks at us, one by one, and then opens his mouth and lets out a single syllable. He has lost weight and he's filthy. Vicky buries her face in his fur.